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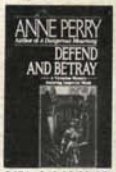

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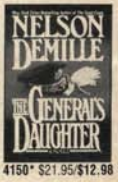

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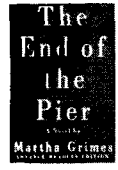

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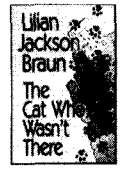

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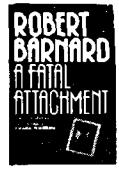

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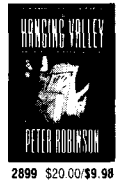

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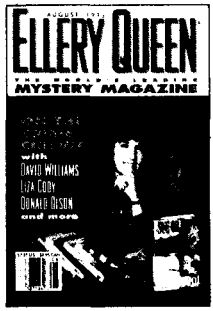

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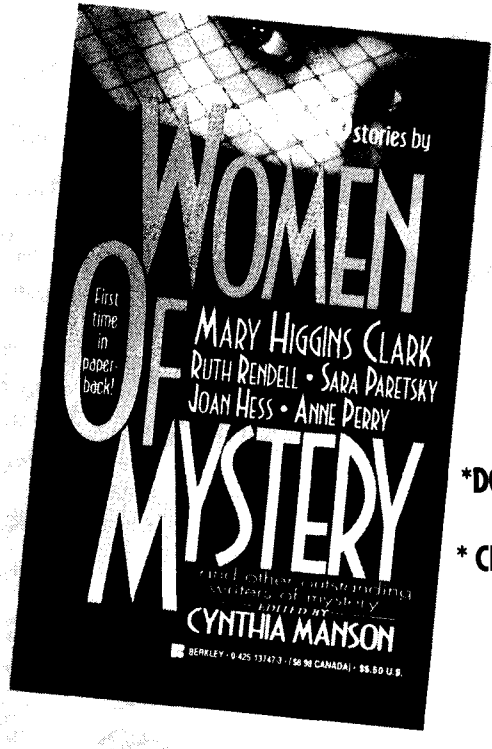

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FREEZE EVERYBODY

by DAVID WILLIAMS

The little doctor dismounted at the end of the long gravelled driveway and wiped his forehead. It had been a hot ride from the village. He leaned his bicycle against the outside wall of the substantial, covered porch, and carefully removed his jacket from the wicker basket attached to the handlebars. When he had just as carefully unfolded and donned the jacket, he removed the oblong medical case from the same receptacle. Instinctively he glanced up at the main bedroom window in the east wing of the big Victorian house. This was to the right of the front door, under a heavy pointed gable. Then he ascended the two wide marble steps and rang the bell. It was a rather timid ring, but then he was a rather timid man.

He was glad that it was the maid, Bridget O'Mara, who opened the door.

"Would you be caring to bring your bike inside the porch, Dr. Slansky?" she asked, stuffing a bunched handkerchief into the pocket of her plain black dress.

She was a sturdy, full-bodied woman, with dark eyes, a possibly sensuous mouth, and good legs, but she was still no beauty. Her skin was rough, the features coarse, and the short wiry hair unkempt and

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already flecked with grey. Bridget had been in service in this Norfolk house for twenty-two of her thirty-eight years, and though she had never lost the brogue, it was more than a decade since ever she had thought of Limerick as home, or spinsterhood as anything other than a permanent status.

"The bike should be all right there. Yes. Thank you. Thank you," Rudolf Slansky repeated, bobbing his close-cropped head, overgrateful as always and now with an added nervous concern. He could tell Bridget had been crying and he was unsure whether it was proper for him to enquire why.

"Shall I go straight up?" he asked, after deciding that the tears were none of his business—regretfully so, because he was naturally compassionate and because he was drawn to rough country women.

"If you please, Madam wants to see you in the drawing room, Doctor." There was a little choking noise at the end of the words which suggested the tears were still, as it were, available on tap.

Bridget closed the door, and without further comment or attempt at pleasantry, led the way through the stone vaulted hall to the drawing room.

The doctor's worn, leather-soled shoes tapped out his progress on the shining, coloured tiles in a way that reduced him to tiptoeing out of inane but acute embarrassment. It was a house that filled him with insensible awe every time he entered it—and this was the fourth visit in the ten days he had been in temporary charge of the medical practice in the village. In the diminished number of practices where he usually got locum work there were few Gothic mansions and none with live-in maids.

"No car today, Dr. Slansky?" Mrs. Chalfont questioned when he entered the room, establishing that she had watched part of his slow and demeaning approach to the house from where she was sitting near the open French windows. She regularly pronounced his name as "Shlansky," which was wrong, but he would not have dared tell her so. It didn't matter, except her invention seemed to be in some way a product of disdain, like the no more than patronising smile that regularly passed as her initial greeting.

Maud Chalfont was a widow of nearly sixty, which made her several years older than the doctor, though indubitably better preserved than he. She was slim and erect, with a striking countenance, and a presence and voice that spelt breeding and authority. Her tinted hair seemed always recently arranged. Her clothes were good, though styled to suit the owner, not the current fashion. Today

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she was wearing a pale-blue silk dress, the half sleeves and three-quarter-length skirt advantaging both her firm forearms and the well-turned ankles gracefully crossed above high-heeled court shoes. A double row of pearls at her neck matched the bracelet on her right wrist.

For Slansky to come before Mrs. Chalfont was like having an audience with the queen, not that he had ever had an audience with the queen. He imagined the drawing room at Buckingham Palace would be very similar to this one though—elegant, tidy, crammed with antique furniture, priceless pictures, and with carpet so thick that it put extra effort into walking.

"The car I was to use has broken down again. I'm thinking it's not a very good car," he said in a strained voice, unable either to prevent both cheeks twitching nervously, or a reversion to the halting constructions of his refugee days fifteen years before this. "It's a not very new car, of course," he added apologetically, eyes blinking too often in the moon-shaped face.

"Foreign," Mrs. Chalfont snapped back imperiously.

Slansky felt that the deprecating of the vehicle's origins might easily have been intended to cover him as well. "It's a Ford. I think it was made—"

"No matter," the other interrupted. "Dr. Riggle should have left you better provided. Since you don't have a car of your own." But the last words implied that the lack of a powered conveyance was still due to Slansky's willful carelessness. "Sit down, please." She indicated an armchair somewhat smaller and definitely lower than the one she was occupying.

"Thank you. Thank you." He nodded his way to the chair, then sat on the edge of the seat cushion, very gently, hoping not to squash it too much, and with his elbows tight to his sides. He kept the bag upright on his lap, as if it were there for use as a means of defence. His sweating hands clasped the handle.

"How much longer will Dr. Riggle be away?" asked Mrs. Chalfont.

"Two weeks yet. Two weeks and three days."

"Good."

Out of natural humility, the doctor couldn't imagine why she should think it was that. "I hope Mr. Gripp is making progress," he offered.

"We'll talk about my brother later. Where do you go after this?"

"After this? Back to the village. I have the surgery to take at—"

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"I don't mean this afternoon," she broke in impatiently. "I mean when Dr. Riggle gets back. Have you another temporary position to go to?"

He swallowed awkwardly. "Perhaps I will have. Nothing is arranged yet. Then it will be the middle of September. You understand there is not so much need for locums then. Not after the school holidays. But the medical agency—"

"How many weeks have you worked this year, Dr. Slansky?" came as a demand not as a polite enquiry.

He hesitated. "Quite a lot, I think." Nervously his left hand moved to cover the frayed right cuff of his shirt now revealed as buttonless, and as conspicuous as a flag of surrender—a soiled one at that.

"I wonder if you're being quite accurate? You were engaged at a very short notice by Dr. Riggle when the doctor who usually stands in for him had to cancel. So you were available at no notice in the middle of the school holidays, when there is very great demand for locums. Good ones, that is. But evidently no one had demanded you, Dr. Slansky? You are Czech?"

"Yes . . . That is . . . No . . . I'm naturalised British now. Since fourteen years." The change of subject had thrown him. He leaned forward earnestly, over the case. "Also I requalified. Since I am coming here from Prague. After the Russian invasion, you understand?"

"And your family?"

"Family? My mother and father are dead now. A long time. I have a brother. In Czechoslovakia still." He loosened his collar. The button on that came off too as he touched it.

"You're not married?"

He shook his head, wondering if a nearly total lack of buttons had suggested the question. "It was never possible."

"And do you have a home anywhere?"

His cheeks twitched again. "Not at the moment."

"Why did you leave the permanent practice you were in? In the Midlands, wasn't it?"

He could feel the cold sweat running down his reddening face and neck. The eyes first registered denial, then dulled with resignation before he spoke. "That was five years ago. I was assistant doctor only in the practice." He fumbled for his handkerchief. "I wasn't needed anymore."

"After eight years?" She fixed him with a merciless gaze. "Surely it was because you were struck off the medical register? I have made enquiries."

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He looked down, wiping his face. "Not struck off so much as . . . as suspended. I was reinstated after two years." His head came up again slowly. "It was not for something immoral. Nothing like that. A wrong diagnosis only."

"But a fatal one? A patient died, I believe."

"A very old patient, yes. It was better I took the blame. The other doctor, the senior partner . . ." But he left the sentence unfinished. There was no point in trying to explain to people. It was too complicated. Too undignified.

"And you haven't had a permanent post since that time?"

"No." He straightened, then gave a little sigh. "Mrs. Chalfont, why are you asking me all this? If you think I'm not a good enough doctor for your brother, I won't come again."

"On the contrary, Dr. Slansky, I think you're an excellent doctor. So much so, I have an important proposition to put to you."

"To me?" He looked about as if there might be someone else she was addressing.

"I hope you will agree to become my brother's personal physician, giving your attention entirely to him."

"Entirely? Just to him?" His mouth dropped. "But I don't think such an arrangement would be possible. I am only staying at Dr. Riggle's house until—" He was stopped by the dismissive wave of an elegant hand.

"Of course, you'll need to live here. Rent free. There's an unoccupied flat above the garage. It's furnished, and very comfortable. A main meal will be provided."

"I see." His face was still showing perplexity, but the glimmerings too of something like hope. "You're very kind, but since I have no money—" He shook his head, confused and embarrassed. "What I mean is—"

"Your salary will be twenty-five thousand pounds a year, paid monthly in advance. But I shall require you to sign a contract letter stipulating you will stay for seven years. At the end of that time there will be a hundred-thousand-pound bonus in addition to your salary. You will be sixty-five then. An appropriate time to retire, perhaps? You would be wise to make pension arrangements out of your income meantime, but that, of course, is up to you."

"Yes," said the doctor, making a breathy noise in his throat that was really a strangled shout for joy.

"You will be entitled to four separate weeks holiday a year. But you must never be absent for more than a week at a time. Never."

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"Never," he repeated with spirit, and as though longer holidays should properly be regarded as sinful.

"You will keep daily written reports on my brother's condition, noting the times of day you see him, his temperature, his blood pressure at appropriate intervals, the medication you prescribe. So that there's a record."

"Of course."

"Good." Mrs. Chalfont gave a gracious nod. "So do I take it you accept the post, and the conditions?"

"I have to accept so soon?"

"Is there any need for delay on your part?"

He hesitated for a brief moment, then shrugged. "No, not at all. So, yes, I accept. Thank you." Then his face clouded. "Only . . ."

"Only what, Doctor?"

"Your brother, Mr. Gripp, he's had two strokes. Not so serious as they could have been. Except all strokes are serious. And he's already sixty-six, I think. It's not certain that to have a doctor here all the time will stop him having another stroke. Perhaps one that will be most serious."

"If you're concerned about keeping my brother alive, you needn't be." She turned to ring the silver handbell on the table beside her. "You see, he's dead already. Oh yes, he went very peacefully. Another stroke. When he was asleep. At about this time yesterday. His body is in the deep freeze. I had it put there immediately."

"More tea, Doctor?" Mrs. Chalfont asked some minutes later, holding her hand out for his cup. "So we have to maintain the pretence that my brother Edwin is alive for the next seven years. If his death were reported now, sixty percent of the estate would go in taxes. I consider that's nothing less than confiscation, but it's the law."

Still dazed by events, Dr. Slansky passed over his cup. "It would be such a lot of money? For the taxes?" he asked tentatively.

"Several million pounds. Despite the fact that my brother had recently transferred most of his wealth to my two sons and their children. Regrettably, it was necessary for him to live for seven years for his gifts to be free of Inheritance Tax. You'll know enough about Inheritance Tax to understand?" But her expression made it clear she hardly expected him to know more than the minimum—but enough to appreciate the special hardships of the very rich.

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"I think so. And it wasn't possible to make the gifts earlier?"

Her mouth tightened. "It was not until after his wife Rachel died, a year ago, that my brother was free to see reason. I mean in relation to making a just and equitable disposition of his great wealth."

"That would have been after his first stroke?"

"Yes. It was when I came to live here. To look after him." She handed him back his cup. "Rachel always disliked me, and the feeling was mutual. For some reason she envied me my scholarly husband, though she was aware that as a lecturer at a provincial university his income was quite inadequate. I fear Edwin was no intellectual. He made his fortune at a fairly early age. In property development." She pronounced the last phrase as though it rated about level with prostitution and drug trafficking. "Our father was a general in the army. A fine soldier, but not wealthy, you understand?" It was plain, however, that the general must have had other qualities, no doubt to do with moral not monetary values. "My sister-in-law was also jealous of our children. She and Edwin were childless. She was a good deal younger than he was, and her death was unexpected. In a car accident. Until then, Edwin had left everything to her. He had naturally expected to die first."

"She would not have had to pay this Inheritance Tax?" the doctor asked.

"No. It isn't levied on widows. Only on their estates after death. If she had survived, Rachel would have left nothing to me or to my children. It was providential that Edwin survived her. Except he didn't do so for long enough."

Slansky nodded, but he looked troubled. "Seven years is a long time to . . . to pretend, Mrs. Chalfont."

"But not if things have been planned properly. I had anticipated my brother's death might occur too early, though not nearly so early as it did. He seemed to be recovering well enough from the first stroke, but not from the second, as you know. However, I was prepared for the loss. Emotionally and in practical terms."

"In practical terms," he echoed involuntarily: it was difficult to picture Mrs. Chalfont being emotional in any circumstances.

"I am quite satisfied the body will store satisfactorily where it is."

"In a deep freezer?"

"A large one. Acquired for the purpose some time ago. It's in the basement. Locked. When the time comes, we shall need to remove the body and allow it to defrost. I have concluded that no ordinary

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undertaker is going to suspect what has happened. Provided we are careful. Do you agree?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "Not an undertaker, no. But if there is an autopsy—"

"There will be no autopsy, Doctor. Why should there be? An autopsy is required only if someone dies who hasn't been seen by his doctor for two weeks. Or if the circumstances are unusual or suspicious. Otherwise the attending doctor is perfectly entitled to issue a death certificate. If you were reporting my brother's death today, would you have any doubts about the cause?"

Slansky stared at the little pile of cake crumbs he had made on the plate he was holding. "No. None. When I saw him two days ago he was not so good. He had made very little recovery since his last cerebrovascular accident. Another could have happened soon. Or a coronary thrombosis. His death also."

"Exactly. So you would have issued the certificate. I would have taken it to the registrar. The funeral would have taken place later this week. Everything would have been normal. What difference is there that we delay the whole matter by seven years?"

"None really, I suppose." In truth, the question had made him a good deal more comfortable about the plan. "Except no one can see him in that time?"

"People will accept that you see him. That I shall see him. That Bridget will see him. It will appear we shall all be seeing him daily. No one else has been near him since he came back from hospital six weeks ago. No one except Dr. Riggle, before he went on holiday and you took over. It's unlikely anyone else would have seen him. Ever. No matter how long he had survived. He has certainly been in no state to receive visitors, nor shown any signs that he ever would again. Isn't that true?"

"I'm afraid so. It's not likely he would have improved much. A little perhaps."

"Quite. It's why his passing has been a blessing for him. But that's no reason why his heirs should suffer." Mrs. Chalfont nodded decisively. "You know there are no servants besides Bridget? Not anymore. Except for Moffat the gardener, and he doesn't live in. He's in the kitchen from time to time, that's all. Naturally, he's to know nothing of the arrangement."

"And your sons, Mrs. Chalfont? Your two sons?"

"They and their families live far from here. They have never been in the habit of visiting my brother. There's less reason than ever

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that they should begin now. I shall, of course, visit them from time to time."

"Will you tell your sons about the . . . the . . . ?"

"The subterfuge? Certainly not. That will be neither appropriate nor necessary."

"Dr. Riggle—"

"Is no problem," she interrupted. "Edwin never really cared for him, and Riggle never relished coming here. It's too out of the way. Too isolated. I shall simply explain that Edwin has taken a great liking to you, so much so that we've decided to retain your services full time."

"So could I ask, Mrs. Chalfont, what would you have done if I hadn't been here?" It had taken some courage for him to put the question.

"I was in the process of finding a doctor similarly placed to yourself. Someone ready to accept the position of personal physician to my brother while he was still alive," she replied.

"*And to carry on, like you've asked me, if he died too soon?*"

"Yes. Obviously there would have been a risk. It was imperative I chose the right man. As it happens, I was using the same medical agency as you. I didn't expect Edwin to die so soon, of course, which is why I was overtaken by events. So your presence and your . . . your suitability were both fortuitous."

Slansky nodded thoughtfully. "And your maid also knows everything."

"Bridget was devoted to my brother. It was she who took him to . . . to where he is now. She showed such reverence." Mrs. Chalfont looked out onto the terrace, her eyes indicating stoic forbearance if not actual grief. "Naturally, like you, Bridget will benefit immediately and in the long term from the arrangement."

"Naturally," he repeated, putting his plate on the side table with his cup. "It is breaking the law, of course."

"Yes. We shall both be doing that, Doctor. If we are discovered, I imagine the consequences for you would be worse than for me. However, I see no possibility of that happening. Even so, it is why I shall need your signed acknowledgement of the terms we have agreed. Just so that we know exactly where we stand." She paused to be sure that the consequences of her words, like the meaningful look, had registered properly. "Of course, the rewards for a successful conclusion are ample compensation, don't you agree?"

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"Yes, Mrs. Chalfont." He swallowed, steeling himself not to contemplate going back on anything. "I think I should examine the body now."

"Quite right. Bridget will show you." She rang the bell again.

And so began the period of nearly seven years through which three people successfully maintained the apparent survival of Edwin Gripp.

Dr. Slansky gradually settled for a standard of living he had never remotely enjoyed in the whole of his previous and disjointed career. The flat was as comfortable as Mrs. Chalfont had claimed. Bridget brought him lunch each day on a tray, and did his laundry, cleaning, and shopping. He indulged his taste for literature and music, building a substantial library of mostly scholarly paperbacks, and tape recordings of classical orchestral works. He had needed to buy a good radio and tape player, but the price had been relatively minor. It was not until the second year that he abandoned bicycling as his normal method of transportation. That was when he acquired the small, reliable secondhand car. Even so, it was some time before he could bring himself easily to accept that he could afford modest luxuries.

The doctor grew not to miss his active professional life. In his way, he had been dedicated to medicine. Yet since his suspension and reinstatement, the opportunities for work had diminished almost into infinity. If it had not been for Mrs. Chalfont's offer he could well have been forced to find another kind of employment, and at his age that might not have been easy. However, he was assiduous in maintaining his fictitious patient's medical records, to the point where they came to be a useful, perhaps even a necessary sublimation. The completeness of the notes was matched by the inventiveness that went into their compiling. In course of time, they built up into a meticulous case study in the care and rehabilitation of a stroke victim. Mrs. Chalfont was duly impressed, but in the distant manner to which she had reverted soon after the arrangement had been agreed.

Like a priest repairing to church to say the daily offices, Slansky twice a day visited Edwin's empty bedroom, each time being sure to appear at the window so that Moffat the gardener, or the postman, the milkman, the garbage collector, or those others who regularly came to the house might note his presence in the sickroom.

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Bridget regularly took meals up to Edwin's room—trays of genuine food which she stayed there to consume herself, on the pretence that the patient needed help with his eating. In fact, this was the way she took most of her own meals, while watching the television set installed at the bedside.

It was this last habit as much as anything else that brought Slansky and Bridget closer together.

The doctor was not gregarious by nature, but after a while the intellectual content of his new life began to pall as his main source of fulfillment. Quite simply, he felt a loneliness, and more, the renewal of a primaeval sense of incompleteness that had pervaded his old impecunious existence, but which his present affluence made unnecessary. Naturally, the constrictions of his life were hardly conducive to the making of new friends, and in any case he was basically shy. Mrs. Chalfont provided no companionship, indeed she tended to treat him rather as she would an upper servant. After she was satisfied that he was going to further her seven years purpose in a much better than adequate manner, she tended to absent herself from the house more and more, making visits to family and friends. Sometimes she was away for quite long periods.

So there was Bridget.

At the start, the doctor took to dropping into the kitchen for coffee mid-morning, though that sometimes involved suffering the company of garrulous old Moffat, who did the same, and who was no stimulus to anything. Bridget was usually too busy to linger when she brought the lunch tray, which was why Slansky finally elected to take his lunch with her in Edwin's room. He thus became a fairly frequent viewer of early afternoon television, just as, in the course of time, Bridget became an awed listener to taped Mozart and Beethoven: this was after she took to accepting the doctor's regular invitations to wine and light suppers in his flat.

Proximity between members of the opposite sex often serves to reveal attractions and to obscure blemishes, the more so with a couple left in isolation. The Irishwoman's rough exterior and untutored mind soon ceased to register in the doctor's perception of her. Increasingly he came to see her as someone altogether companionable, and, as time went by, physically desirable as well.

For her part, Bridget came to revere the little refugee doctor, to hang on his every accented word, to marvel at his knowledge, education, and culture, and most of all to be overwhelmed at the attention he was paying her.

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Even so, the period during which friendship ripened into courtship was a very long one: it was nearly six years before Slansky proposed marriage. But neither party was practised in wooing or being wooed, and both came from backgrounds where protracted courtships had been the rule rather than the exception. Nor was time ever a conscious consideration. What developed into an always chaste romance came to provide the central theme in their lives—something to savour and not to condense, for patience had been a way of life to both since childhood. In truth also, the two had reached ages where the more intimate physical aspects of the affair needed to be approached with some trepidation—on her part out of a modesty born of total innocence, and on his because of an illogical, persistent, and spectral presentiment that when put to the test his sexual capacities might prove less than adequate.

So it was that, even during the year following the formal engagement, Slansky still took no liberties with his future bride.

The wedding finally took place in the middle of the last year of Slansky's contract with Mrs. Chalfont. The ceremony was at a registrar's office with only Moffat and his wife present as witnesses.

Mrs. Chalfont approved the union, believing that the stronger the dependence between her two conspirators, the more they would be obliged to keep faith with her and each other to the end—the end that was in any case very near.

The honeymoon was spent in Scarborough, and lasted a week. This was the longest time the doctor was permitted to be away, and the only time he and Bridget had ever been absent from the house at the same time. This was a concession on Mrs. Chalfont's part, since it meant she had to stay at home for the whole week. One of the three had to be there always for fear of fire, or burglary, or some other hazard that could result in outsiders learning that Edwin was no longer alive or even reasonably unwell.

The couple returned with their love strengthened by lusty passion. The doctor's misgivings about his likely performance in bed had been dispelled on the first night, a result more than a little due to an unexpected and enduring influence beyond his own control.

For when it came to the point, Bridget's own demure inhibitions had quite evaporated—dispersed by the triumph of a formidable natural instinct. Once she had savoured the ecstasy of the sexual act, her appetite for more of the same had become insatiable: despite her inexperience, the woman had proved to be a veritable Aphrodite. It was as though love-making came more easily to this virile Irish

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housemaid than bed-making ever had—and with many more variations.

The couple had scarcely left their Scarborough hotel room except for meals. In her enthusiasm, Bridget would even have done without the food for most of the time, except that after a little while Slansky clearly needed to increase his calorie intake to maintain his strength.

Nor did Bridget's joy in uninhibited and frequent sexual concourse diminish one bit on their return. There was no more television viewing after lunch in Edwin's room, not when there were livelier things to do in Edwin's empty bed. And the light suppers in the flat the couple now shared were consumed in the bedroom not the living room—still often with wine, and a musical accompaniment, though Bridget had developed a strong preference for the noisier climactic pieces.

It never occurred to this simple woman that so much draining of his manhood might be doing her husband a mischief. Nor could the now sixty-four-year-old Slansky bring himself to impugn that very manhood by denying his wife her consuming pleasure, or even to explain why moderation might be indicated.

In truth, of course, Slansky enjoyed their physical relationship just as much as his wife did, which is why he took a daringly fatalistic view on what it might be doing to him.

"That pain in your chest is mild angina all right," said Dr. Riggle in his surgery, after examining Slansky thoroughly six months after the marriage. He had agreed to keep the result of the consultation confidential. Slansky had told Bridget that he had needed advice about a backache. "Probably not serious yet, but you should see a cardiologist all the same. Meantime, you want to take it easier. That new wife of yours is too demanding perhaps?" Riggle added, but half in jest. No one except Slansky credited uncomely Bridget with a boundless sexual appetite.

Slansky promised to do what the other doctor advised, though he wasn't quite as good as his word. He decided to delay seeing the heart specialist, and simply to take the pills prescribed, while conserving his energy as best he could. He determined to eat carefully, avoiding animal fats, dosing himself with extra vitamins, and sneaking as much sleep as possible when Bridget was busy at her duties in the main house.

Mrs. Chalfont had noticed no change in the doctor, but she never paid much attention to his appearance. And she was bringing her

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own grand design to fruition just a few days after he had been to see Riggle, so there were much more important considerations than Slansky's health to engage her.

"I telephoned the undertaker, Doctor," she announced on the day appointed for Edwin's second "death": it was a Sunday. "As I expected, there was no one there. Only an answering machine. I'll call again first thing tomorrow. So you can date the death certificate for today or tomorrow. Whichever is most credible."

"Today is best, I think. If you want the funeral to be on Thursday."

"Very well. You'd better give me the certificate straight away. And you can ring Dr. Riggle tonight. About the extra certificate he has to sign. For the cremation." She had the order of events set firmly in her mind—as might have been expected of a general's daughter.

Seven years and six months had passed since Edwin Gripp had formally given away his money to his sister's family. Mrs. Chalfont had regarded the extra half year as a necessary touch, to avoid arousing suspicion at the Inland Revenue.

It was mid-January, and snowing hard—the kind of conditions that prompted people to be concerned more with their own comforts than with the overzealous execution of official duties. Mrs. Chalfont had thought of such things—which included the undertakers being closed on Sundays: that had given her a full day in hand in case anything had gone wrong.

Slansky and Bridget had removed the body from the deep freezer the night before. It had been left to thaw out slowly in the cellar. Then they had dried it, carried it upstairs, and put it to bed.

Everything seemed to be going exactly as planned. That was, until a panic-voiced Mrs. Chalfont summoned Slansky over the house telephone in the flat at three o'clock the next morning.

"I think he's gone too soft. Much too soft," she clamoured when they were both standing at the bedside. It was quite exceptional for her to show such nervousness. Unable to sleep, she had gone in a few minutes earlier to check on the condition of her brother's corpse. "I mean he looks as if he might . . . well, flatten out altogether. Like . . . like heated wax. Is it because it's been so long?"

Edwin's face was wan and sunken, but there was every reason for that: he was dead, and Slansky knew the time of his dying had no relevance. "He's quite normal, Mrs. Chalfont. I mean for someone who's . . . He's quite normal." The doctor had hesitated over stating the obvious, finding words sleepily, and breathing hard. There was

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a pain in his chest. He had raced to the house half dressed, then hurried up the stairs—and he had been exhausted before Mrs. Chalfont had woken him: Bridget was extra demanding at weekends.

"Should we open the windows? To stop him getting too warm?" asked Mrs. Chalfont, still on edge.

"If you like. He won't alter now. But it won't do any harm." Slansky moved across the room. He had to wrestle with the catch of the heavy casement before he got it to budge. He shivered as the icy wind blew in on him.

"That's all right, then, Doctor. I'm sorry I disturbed you. I'll see you in the morning."

Except it was not all right. Little Dr. Slansky died suddenly a few moments later, on the way back to the flat—in the driveway, in the freezing snow, of a massive heart attack.

It was Bridget who found him, and demented Bridget who then had to be coaxed into saving seven years work from going to waste on the very last day.

"A doubly sad event, Mrs. Chalfont," said the grey-haired, venerable Dr. Riggle. "Two deaths in such a short time. Your brother a week ago today. Dr. Slansky this morning. Bridget is bearing up well, as you are." He shook his head.

It was midday on the following Sunday. The two were seated in Mrs. Chalfont's drawing room.

"It was good of you to come so promptly, and with the roads still in such terrible condition. Thank you too for attending my brother's funeral on Thursday, Doctor."

"I was glad to pay my respects. There were not many left hereabouts who knew him well." He paused. "I understand now why Dr. Slansky wasn't there."

"He was quite unwell. Throughout the week. He insisted it was only a chill," she put in solemnly. "Of course, we had no idea he was seriously ill."

"Hm. After I'd examined him, I'm afraid he made me swear I'd tell no one what was wrong with him."

"He really shouldn't have ventured out this morning. Neither Bridget nor I knew he was going, of course. We were both here in the house. He should never have gone to the postbox. Not on foot."

"That's right, I'm afraid. This east wind can play the very devil with angina sufferers."

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"He didn't go out at all in the week. But he wouldn't stay in bed. In case he was needed. In case there were any other formalities to complete. Over my brother's death. There weren't, I gather." She chilled at the thought of what fresh subterfuges she'd have had to invent if there had been.

As a last resort she had been going to say Slansky had been called to Prague urgently. It simply wouldn't have done to have admitted his death so close to that of her brother's. It could so easily have produced enquiries, which, worst of all, could have resulted in someone ordering an autopsy on Edwin. As things now stood, a decent interval had elapsed between the two events.

Altogether though, it had been the worst week of Mrs. Chalfont's life. "Thank you for signing the second death certificate approving Edwin's cremation, by the way," she said.

"Ah yes, there have to be two doctors for that," Riggle replied. "In this case it was only a formality, as Dr. Slansky suggested when he phoned me last Sunday night. The authorities need to be sure there's nothing fishy, you see? Before a cremation." He cleared his throat. "I didn't think it necessary to come out here. I just took a quick glance at the body. In the drawer at the undertakers. On Tuesday. I didn't need to . . . to fiddle about with it in any way. I thought you'd like to know that. Relatives usually do."

"Thank you." She had been right in calculating it would have been an insufferably long way for ageing Dr. Riggle to have come to the house in the snow for a formality. If he had seen the body here instead of in a refrigerated drawer at the undertakers he might have been prompted to look more closely—even to "fiddle."

She had taken an extra risk by insisting on a cremation—because there would be nothing to exhume for examination afterwards.

"Indeed, it was a great credit to Dr. Slansky that your brother survived as long as he did. Great credit. Better physician than I took him for, as a matter of fact," Riggle continued in a patronising tone. "Those case notes are almost good enough for publication in a medical journal. I told Bridget as much just now. And I gathered from her—"

"That I am arranging to have them published privately?" she interrupted. "Yes. The idea seemed to please her." In fact, it had proved to be Mrs. Chalfont's *coup de main*. "I was deeply grateful to Dr. Slansky. It was a very great comfort to me to have Edwin for all those years more. His mind was quite active you understand? To the end."

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"Yes, the case notes show it."

Mrs. Chalfont rearranged the folds of the black lace dress she had chosen for the occasion of the doctor's visit. "By the way, will there be an autopsy on Dr. Slansky?"

"Oh no. I examined him only last week."

"I wondered about that." It was a gross understatement: she had counted on it—on the rule about two weeks.

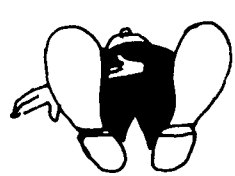
"I told him he had angina. His dying of a heart attack today is no surprise. Classic end from classic symptoms. I've given Bridget the death certificate already." He sighed. "Poor simple creature. Heartbroken, of course. She'll be all right, I assume? Financially, I mean."

"Quite all right, yes. I can vouch for that." Except the simple creature was refusing to accept the money due to her dead husband. It was true she was heartbroken, certain that Slansky's death had been divine retribution, because they hadn't been married in a Catholic church. She was sure that meant she had lived in sin like a wanton, wicked woman for all those months, glorying in the weaknesses of the flesh.

Mrs. Chalfont had at first found this attitude superstitious and difficult to credit, particularly since Bridget had stopped going to Mass years before. On the other hand, in a curious way it seemed actually to help with Bridget's stoic acceptance of events. And if she hadn't felt so guilty she would probably not have been ready to accept that there was atonement in helping Mrs. Chalfont's deserving children and grandchildren. But it had been the offer to publish the casebook as a memorial to Dr. Slansky that had finally tipped the balance.

"Well, I must be going." The doctor rose from the armchair, then gazed for a moment through the window at the snow-decked landscape beyond. "I don't believe Slansky could have suffered at all. But, you know, with his body lying there in these nearly arctic conditions for anything up to three hours—" He paused and gave a shrug. "You wouldn't believe, it was as though he'd been in a deep freezer for a week."

"Oh, I can *well* believe it," said Mrs. Chalfont earnestly.



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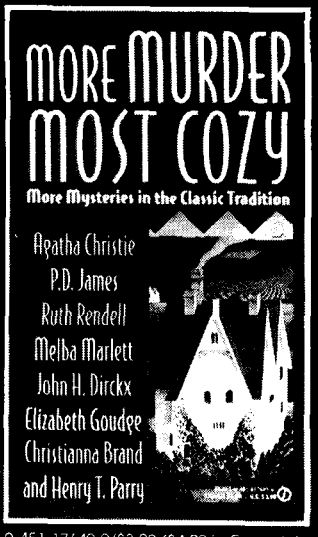

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THE TROUBLE AT BAYTOWN HIGH

by WILLIAM BANKIER

They were tuning up in the band room at Baytown High School. It was a murderous sound. Teddy Munroe's clarinet gave out the scream of a hungry seagull. He raised the instrument above his head and stopped himself just short of breaking it over a chair.

"Go ahead," Nancy Maxwell said. She held her clarinet balanced gracefully on tapered fingers. "Bash it all to pieces. That's your style, Teddy."

"I need a new reed. You've got reeds, Nancy. Give us a reed."

"I wouldn't give you the time of day." She glanced at the clock above the door leading to the corridor. "Ten to nine. Mr. Loom will whimper if we're late." She headed for the door.

"Be a sweetheart."

"I'm not. I'm a girl who can't drive her father's car because you drove it drunk and totaled the front end."

"That was last winter. Let it go." Munroe moved gracefully to intercept Nancy, putting one foot on a chair so that his bent knee blocked her way. His face was close to hers. A half smile suggested

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he was a bad boy but he knew she cared about him anyway. "I can't play, Nancy. Not if you don't give me a reed."

She switched her head into profile, swiftly, and a fringe of blond hair whipped his cheek. "I'm not kidding, Teddy. You really cheese me off."

"She's not kidding, Teddy," the bass drummer said, lugging his bulky instrument through the doorway. "You really cheese her off."

"See how you embarrass me?" Munroe said. With a fingertip, he turned her chin back his way. "Now do as I ask before I have to kiss you."

"Anything to avoid such an experience." Nancy snapped the hasps on her instrument case, lifted the lid, and took out a reed from a supply of several in a velour cavity. The strip of shaped bamboo was enclosed in a plastic envelope. She handed it to her former boyfriend. "I hope you choke on it," she snapped as she moved away.

The bass drummer was lurking outside the doorway. "She hopes you choke on it!" One cymbal was fastened to the frame of the drum. The student held the other by a strap. He brought both together to punctuate his joke.

The band room was empty now, except for Ted Munroe. "I'll wet this baby," he called, "and then I'll catch up." He took the reed from its envelope and prepared to slip it under his tongue like a patient taking his own temperature. "Don't start without me."

The principal was already on stage, seated near the lectern, reading his notes. Miss Finlayson, the English teacher, was talking to Mr. Elfstrom, the new chemistry teacher. They were entering slowly from the wings. Miss Finlayson was effervescing all over Mr. Elfstrom. At twenty-seven he was only slightly more than half the English teacher's age. She was, however, a youthful, vigorous, and not unattractive fifty. Elfstrom was trying to conceal his boredom as he drew back a chair and held it while Miss Finlayson sat down.

Mr. Loom was at the podium, staring ostentatiously at his watch. Nancy hurried to her chair in the woodwind section. The student body was starting to arrive.

" 'Sons of the Brave,' " Loom intoned. He kept repeating the title of the opening march to his musicians as they hurried in.

Nancy leafed through her folder and found the battered sheet music. She arranged it on the music stand which served herself and Teddy Munroe. He would occupy the folding chair beside her. She used a wooden clothes-peg to clip the page to the stand.

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Was Mr. Elfstrom looking at her? She imagined she could feel the intensity of his gaze. Glancing to the stage, Nancy caught him looking away. She kept on watching until he turned back to her. Then she smiled and went back to her music.

It was a nice flirtation. Her decision to take chemistry that term was based on the arrival of Mr. Elfstrom. Most teachers at Baytown High were fossils. Now, here was this tweedy guy who was almost one with the kids.

The babble of conversation from the hall increased. Mr. Loom tapped for attention, then raised the baton beside his shiny, bald head. He frowned through rimless glasses at Teddy's empty chair. With small gestures, he used the stick to count one bar of tempo. Then he delivered a severe downbeat and the band began to play. Most of them. The others joined in as they lifted instruments to lips, arranged fingers on valves, found the place on the music sheet.

Nancy knew the tune from the CBC program "Musical March Past," which was always playing on the kitchen radio as she hurried through breakfast. Her father would be sluicing the frying pan in sudsy water, trying to keep house now that the family no longer had a mother. Nancy tried to protest. Bacon and eggs were not necessary, she could make do with cold cereal. But Jim Maxwell went on cooking, cleaning, and then rushing to the post office to take his place behind the Registered Mail wicket.

It was the expression on his face that most disturbed Nancy. There was always the grin locked in place, dry teeth and glassy eyes. Death at age forty-nine had been a sort of blessing for Carol Maxwell. It turned off the pain. But her husband's distress had no end to it, apparently. Nancy did what she could to help. Like not asking for money. Like taking care of her clothes, wearing them forever.

The radio rendition of the famous march was a recording by the Foden Motor Works, or some other of the great English bands. Baytown High's version was not the same. There was no blend. Thirty-five enthusiastic kids were all playing solos at the same time on their trombones, trumpets, tubas. Some played better than others, but all could be heard simultaneously. And striding over everything like a dinosaur through underbrush, the bass drum and cymbals emphasized the anarchy—boom, smash, boom, smash!

Nancy was enjoying herself. It was exhilarating. When the clarinets came to an eight-bar rest, she lowered the instrument to her lap. Glancing up at Mr. Loom, she saw the conductor frowning at her as he kept time with the baton in a perfunctory way. She did

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not back down. Her eyes held his and she raised her chin defiantly.

When the march ended, the auditorium resounded with applause. Not that the students loved martial music. But if the band could be encouraged to play another number, the class following assembly might be shortened. The principal knew that trick. He killed the applause and began to read announcements.

Mr. Loom stabbed his baton at the empty chair and lifted his eyebrows. Nancy gave him back raised shoulders. It was typical of Ted Munroe to rock the boat. The car crash, coming not long after her mother's death, had been a prodigious bummer. Her father got the front end fixed, but Nancy knew it upped his insurance premium.

Now here was Teddy being his irritating self. Gotta have a reed, gotta have a reed! She gave him one and what did he do? Decided to play hookey. He was probably down the hill at Lafferty's shooting snooker. Nancy's recollection shifted to Teddy's face, so close she could feel the warmth, his eyes half closed as he said, "Do as I ask before I have to kiss you." His voice all growly.

Something was happening on stage. One of the hall monitors had crept in from the wings and was whispering to Mr. Elfstrom, who occupied the end chair. The chemistry teacher left but was back in less than a minute. He moved behind the row of teachers and approached the principal from behind. The principal stopped speaking but did not look over his shoulder. He kept his eyes on the horizon while Elfstrom's lips moved rapidly beside his ear.

"School," the principal announced when he had absorbed the information, "please stay in your seats. There has been an accident. No one is to leave the auditorium." Then he strode off stage with Elfstrom at his heels.

It seemed as if everybody began talking at once. Nancy shrugged her shoulders and kept saying, "I don't know!" to her fellow musicians. But she was experiencing a terrible feeling of gloom and doom. Teddy Munroe had skipped band at the last moment. And now this.

Her eyes rose to meet the accusing gaze of Mr. Loom. The situation between them was like a burning fire. She felt sorry she had ever started up. He was staring at her as if he could kill her.

A message was being whispered through the assembly. Perhaps the monitor had told another student what he had told Elfstrom. Word reached the band pit. Nancy leaned across a chair to catch what was being said.

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"It's Teddy Munroe," a trombonist relayed the news. "They found him on the band room floor. He's dead!"

A police car pulled up and parked in front of the Maxwell house. Chief Greb got out and slammed the door. He stood for a while, patting his pants, thumbing the rim of his shirt pocket. He was trying to reassure himself that he was ready to go inside.

Nancy's father said from the front window, "He's here."

"Good," Nancy said. Her mother used to say the word, sharply, whenever something unpleasant was coming to try and damage her. "Good!"

"Sorry to bother you with this, Jim," Greb said as he came inside. He knew Maxwell had enough on his plate.

"I don't know what I can tell you," Nancy said. "But I'll tell you anything I can."

"Want some coffee?" Maxwell asked.

"Not just now." The chief perched on the edge of an upholstered chair. His posture told them he was sorry as hell to be intruding even this much. "Nancy, I've been talking to some of the kids who were there. One of them, the bass drum?"

"Giddy Turner?"

"Gideon says you and Ted were arguing."

"He wanted me to give him a reed for his clarinet."

"And you gave him one."

"Eventually."

"And you said you hoped he'd choke on it."

"Did I?"

"So says Gideon." Greb had taken out a notebook and pen. Now he tucked them away, unused. "Ted Munroe used to be your boyfriend."

"We went out once in a while."

"You were mad at him when he wrecked your dad's car."

"Of course. It was a stupid thing to do."

"I guess you could have killed him when he did that."

Nancy's father raised his head. "Should I be hiring a lawyer?"

"I'm not laying a charge."

"Anyway," the girl said, "I was in the auditorium playing with the band. Ted was in the band room."

"That's true." Greb turned innocent eyes in Nancy's direction. "You heard how he died?"

"Some sort of stroke? They say he just stopped breathing."

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"The doctor who examined him said paralysis of the respiratory system. Caused by hydrocyanic acid. What you call cyanide. It was on that reed you gave him but not on the others in your case."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Neither do I. But I'll find out." Greb got to his feet. On his way to the door, he said, "My next interview is with that new chemistry teacher. What's his name?"

"Mr. Elfstrom," Nancy said.

"That's him." More patting of pockets. "You wouldn't happen to have his telephone number?"

"Why would I have his number?"

"Search me. Somebody at the school said you and he were friendly. I'm not going to press it."

Miss Finlayson unplugged the kettle when it started to whistle. She poured boiling water onto a tea bag in a ceramic mug. A scent of jasmine drifted around her. "Tea?" she called as Mr. Loom came into the staff room. "I can make another cup."

"Not for me, thanks," Loom said. He sat at a table beside a window that looked out over the dusty campus. He took papers from a briefcase and spread them on the table. He found a pen in an inside pocket.

"You aren't interested in talking," the English teacher said. She held her mug in both hands just below her chin. Fragrant steam teased her aristocratic nostrils and touched the cap of tight grey curls.

Loom raised an obliging smile. "It's all right," he said. "I'm just going over the lyrics for my 'Baytown Oratorio.' "

"I saw Antonio Paretti in the library last week. He was pleased and proud that you asked him to set your verses to music."

"Tony is good. He telephoned me last month and sang themes for half an hour. Excellent stuff."

Mr. Elfstrom appeared in the doorway and stopped dead. He glanced at Miss Finlayson, then turned and kept on going, his heels resounding down the marble corridor.

"There's one who'll never fit in," Loom said.

"He's a tease," the English teacher said. "A manipulator of feelings. I made the mistake of trying to do something for him."

"Yes?" Loom went on scribbling.

"I knit him a scarf. A lovely fair-isle pattern. Took me weeks. Well, he has no wife to look after him. I saw him all last winter going around with his throat exposed."

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Loom said nothing. He turned a page and ran a finger down lines of verse.

"I'm not one to force myself on somebody," Miss Finlayson went on. "The scarf was not meant to be some ponderous symbol of affection. I simply left it on his desk in the lab with a tiny note. He never responded. I felt like a fool."

"With good reason."

"Mr. Elfstrom is more interested in the girls who take his classes. One in particular."

Loom looked up. "Nancy Maxwell? He can forget about her."

"Why do you say that?"

"She's going to prison. She murdered young Munroe."

"I can't believe she did that."

"They've established there was cyanide on the reed she gave him. She probably got the poison from Elfstrom's lab." Loom wrote another line. "Anyway, that's what Chief Greb thinks."

"He could just as easily accuse Elfstrom," Miss Finlayson stated. "Munroe was Nancy's boyfriend. Elfstrom had been flirting with the girl. He might have been jealous and decided to eliminate his competition."

"Greb could just as easily accuse you," Loom retorted. "You criticize Elfstrom but I think you protest too much. You saw he was going for Nancy Maxwell. So you went into his lab and got the poison and placed it on the reed."

"I had no reason to want Teddy Munroe dead."

"That was unforeseen. You expected Nancy to use the reed," the music teacher said calmly. "You intended to kill her."

Miss Finlayson gulped down her tea and took the mug to the sink. "That's ludicrous," she said.

"Anyway, you took back your scarf," Loom said. "From that ungrateful wretch."

"Yes, I did," Miss Finlayson said. And as she rinsed her mug under cold running water, she was left wondering, how did Loom know that?

Chief Greb was uncomfortable in his dress uniform. It had seemed a good idea to wear it for Ted Munroe's funeral. Now, he took off the dark blue tunic and laid it carefully across his desk. Nancy Maxwell and Mr. Elfstrom watched him from straight-backed chairs. The chief sat down in his swivel chair. He almost lifted his boots onto a corner of the oak surface, then thought better of it.

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"It was good of you folks to come back here for a talk."

"I've told you all I know," the chemistry teacher said. "The hydrocyanic acid was taken from a locked cabinet in my lab. The door was jimmied open. I have the key. There was no need for me to break the lock."

"I believe you," Greb said. "Of course, a lawyer might argue that you broke the lock in order to make it look as if an intruder took the poison."

"That's true," Elfstrom conceded. "The same reasoning would explain why I broke open the door to my classroom."

"No, I have information on that. I interviewed Miss Finlayson. She says she broke the lock on the classroom door. There was a scarf in there she had made for you. She wanted it back."

"All she had to do was ask."

"If you stay long enough in Baytown," Greb advised him, "you'll come to understand the lady would never do that." He turned his attention to Nancy Maxwell. "I was watching you at the cemetery," he said. "You liked that boy a lot."

Nancy had no tears left. "Yes, I did. He was a troublemaker. But I would have been able to change him."

"So there's no way you would feed him a lethal dose. Yet, the reed with the poison on it was in your instrument case. Which can only mean somebody put it there to kill you."

"I thought of that."

"Any idea who it might be?"

"None whatever." Her face was blank, but Nancy's heart was pounding.

"Nobody can keep a secret in Baytown," Greb said. "The high school is typical. Somebody is always talking and everybody is listening." He allowed a few seconds to elapse before he said, "That's why I wanted to take a look at the two of you. Together."

Elfstrom cleared his throat. He shifted his position on the chair.

"You're a young man," the chief said. "Is this your first teaching job?"

"Second."

"You aren't all that much older than some of the more mature senior girls. You both sing in the choir?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "And that reminds me. We're having a practice on stage in the auditorium tonight."

"She's right," Elfstrom said. "We're learning the 'Baytown Oratorio'—the thing Loom wrote for the town centennial."

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Nancy frowned.

"I won't keep you much longer," Greb said. "You two have danced together in the gym, at the Friday afternoon tea dances."

Elfstrom said, "Nancy dances with everybody."

The chief chose his words. "It was suggested to me that you are a frustrated, angry man. You wanted this girl and she turned you down. So you tried to poison her."

"I can guess who made that suggestion," Elfstrom said. "Can you believe it for even half a minute?"

"No."

"I bet it was Miss Finlayson," Nancy put in. "Everybody knows she has the hots for Mr. Elfstrom. She's jealous as hell. I saw her a couple of weeks ago, staring at us at the dance. If looks could kill . . ."

Greb glanced at Elfstrom. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," the chemistry teacher said. "I suppose I'm guilty of scorning her. But I never thought she'd do something as crazy as this."

The chief drove quickly to the old Corman house on Station Street. He parked, then hurried up the cracked pavement between waist-high wildflowers to a front door that needed painting. He knocked and the door was opened almost instantly by Mr. Loom.

"I was on my way out," the music teacher said.

"I know. To rehearse your oratorio at the school auditorium." Greb put on an earnest expression. "I hoped we could talk for just a couple of minutes. I'll drive you to the school."

Loom led the way into a room furnished with an upright piano, a refectory table, and a roll-top desk. The chief looked around in silence as if he were visiting a shrine. "This is where he died," he said at last.

"Old Corman? So they say."

"I was surprised he lasted as long as he did. All that booze."

"The life and death of an eccentric poet," Loom said with a mixture of sarcasm and something else.

"You had no qualms about moving in?"

"I'm not superstitious. I needed a proper place to live. My old apartment had no space."

"You were lucky the widow Corman decided to leave town."

She had no choice. She was trying to protect her daughter, Libby. The father's suicide—you know how cruel some schoolgirls can be. Her so-called friends would never have let her forget."

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Greb moved to the desk. He bent to observe, without touching anything, a few pages of manuscript. Then he straightened and said, "You knew Ted Munroe. You see Nancy Maxwell every day. What's your view of the recent tragedy?"

"I hesitate to say."

"Could she have done it?"

Loom frowned. He made up his mind. "Yes. The girl is more than she seems. She goes about with a sweet exterior. But there's a hard center to her. I've experienced it. You have to sympathize. She lost her mother, and now her father must struggle to keep the family together. They're stuck for money. But the truth is, she can be hard and cold as stone."

"I must confess, that's a side of the girl I've never seen."

"Trust me on it."

"If it were some other victim. If she were attacking you, say. Then I could imagine Nancy Maxwell as you describe her. But she loved that boy."

"Need I quote Oscar Wilde? He knew something about the subject. 'Each man kills the thing he loves.' "

Greb took a half step backwards, as if a dead poet's words had the force to jar a man off balance. He observed Loom respectfully. "That's a definite point," he said. "But I'm still hooked on the other thing. If she was not out to poison Ted Munroe, then the lethal reed was placed in her instrument case with her as the target." Loom was moving to the door. Greb followed him. "Who, then, wanted to kill Nancy Maxwell? And why?"

"I wish I could search for answers, but I'm due at the high school."

"And where is the vial of hydrocyanic acid? I hope the perpetrator disposed of it carefully. It would be inexcusable to leave it where some innocent might stumble across it."

"I promise you," Loom said patiently, "I had nothing to do with any of this."

The music was putting Chief Greb to sleep. He slumped in his seat at the rear of the auditorium, knees braced against the back of a seat in the row ahead. Loom was taking the choir over and over the same passage, trying to get it the way he wanted it.

"No, no, no," he called and the voices trailed off. "Tenors, you are coming in too loud. I want you to start pianissimo, then slowly build until you hit fortissimo on the lines,

'Here, where Baytown stands today,
Once the silent ice held sway . . . ' "

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Greb kept trying to focus his eyes. There was Nancy Maxwell standing in a line of sopranos. Behind her, among the offending tenors, Elfstrom, the chemistry teacher, frowned over his music.

The chief was living with a disturbing feeling. The trouble at Baytown High was not over. Miss Finlayson had confessed to cracking the lock on the door of the chemistry classroom. She had gone in to retrieve the scarf she had presented to Elfstrom as a sign of her affection. And which he, crass man that he was, had never acknowledged.

Greb was certain, however, that the English teacher had not gone on to break into the cabinet where, among other chemicals, the hydrocyanic acid was kept under lock and key. Somebody else, opportunistically perhaps, had done that.

Whoever the thief was, that individual had gone to a lot of trouble to take a clarinet reed from Nancy's instrument case and coat it with the poison. The students, most of them, left their instruments in the band room. The room was often unoccupied. And its door was locked only at the end of the school day.

But it had been a risky thing to do. And the aim, clearly, was to kill Nancy Maxwell. The passing of the deadly reed to Ted Munroe could not have been foreseen.

What now? To take such a risk, the murderer wanted Nancy dead, no mistake about it. She was still alive. Q.E.D.—as Greb's old algebra teacher used to intone when he himself attended classes in this very building—the killer would have to try again. Nancy Maxwell was still due to die.

An hour later, Mr. Loom said, "That's all for tonight. You're tired, I can't get anything more out of you. We'll rehearse again on Friday afternoon, after four. Make a note."

Outside, the choir members were dispersing quickly. Some went down the hill past the courthouse towards the restaurants on Front Street. Others headed into the tree-lined residential streets to the east of the school. The night was balmy, a wave of moist air drifting up from the bay.

Mr. Loom was on his way, briefcase tucked up under his arm. "Nancy," he said as he brushed past, "I left what you were asking me for. It's in an envelope on the podium."

"All right."

"Don't leave it lying about." And the conductor was gone around the edge of the building.

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Mr. Elfstrom materialized out of the shadows. "I'll go back inside with you," he said.

"Please don't bother." Nancy moved towards the lighted doorway.

"It's dangerous around here these days." Elfstrom hurried after her.

"Really, I'd rather go by myself."

"I'm coming with you."

They ended up almost running, the girl two paces ahead. She reached the door to the auditorium, flung it open, and headed down the sloping aisle towards the stage and the wooden podium. No janitorial staff had turned up as yet to switch off lights.

Moving through the exit door at the edge of the stage, Nancy ascended five steps and headed through the wings onto the stage. She reached the podium and looked for the promised envelope. The sloping shelf was bare.

A dull thud followed by a groan occurred behind her at the edge of the stage. She turned and saw Mr. Elfstrom falling to the floor. Behind him stood Mr. Loom, his right arm extended in a follow-through position. In that hand, he held what looked like an iron bar. It had obviously been taken from the open briefcase which the music teacher now set at his feet.

Nancy backed away. Mr. Loom was approaching her. The stage was at least five feet above the floor below. She could jump, but she might turn an ankle.

"I'm sorry it has to end this way," Loom said. "But you brought it on yourself."

"You don't have to pay me."

"Too late for that now. You could decide to talk at any time."

Chief Greb's voice was loud in the empty hall. "She doesn't have to."

Loom dropped the iron bar. He turned and Nancy heard his shoes clattering down the backstage steps. Then he was through the exit doorway, racing up the aisle towards the auditorium door. The police chief moved to the end of his row of seats. He extended his right arm and held it stiff as Loom approached at top speed. The arm caught him under the chin. His momentum carried him forward to a horizontal position in the air, from which he fell flat on his back and lay unconscious.

"I played defensive halfback many years ago on the Baytown senior team," Greb explained. "We called that the clothesline."

* * *

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Nancy Maxwell shifted positions on the front lawn. Her back and knees ached from the time spent rooting out dandelions with a sharp-ended metal implement. The offending weeds were heaped in several piles on the grassy surface.

From the corner of an eye, she saw a police cruiser drive past slowly. She did not look up when it parked across the street, a door opened and slammed, and Chief Greb sauntered her way. His boots performed graceful footwork to avoid potholes.

"How goes?" he said when the shiny black toecaps appeared inches from the weed in progress.

She squinted up at him through a veil of damp hair. "I'm trying to reclaim some lawn from our dandelion patch."

"Noble effort." He hunkered down facing her and began twisting at a healthy specimen with large leaves, a thick, milky stem, and a golden head the size of a half dollar. "Mr. Elfstrom is going to be okay," he said. "Out of hospital this afternoon."

"I'm glad."

"Just came from the jail. Had a talk with Mr. Loom. He's babbling. But he insists he never killed Teddy Munroe."

Nancy said, "You'll need something sharp. You'll never get that out with just your hand."

Greb twisted his fist round and round. Then he exerted a slow, steady drag. The root slid up out of the earth like a thin, white carrot. He tossed the plant on a pile. "Good thing Elfstrom came with you and Loom hit him first. I was asleep in my seat back there. The noise woke me up and I was able to save you."

"I already thanked you."

"Our friend Loom told me something else. He said why he was trying to silence you."

"Then I guess we have to believe him."

"I'd like to hear it from you."

Nancy could kneel no longer. She rolled back onto the seat of her denim shorts. Gloved hands clasped mottled knees. "I was blackmailing him. I only asked for five hundred dollars. He had no way of knowing I'd stop at that, of course. I don't know myself."

"It was the oratorio," Greb offered.

"Yes. I was friends with Libby Corman when she and her family lived in that house. We used to play in the music room on rainy afternoons. One day she went to the bathroom, she was gone a long time. I snooped around, looking in drawers. I came across some

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pages of poetry her father had written." She peered at the chief. "You know he was crazy?"

"Eccentric, I would have said."

"But the verses were terrific. I half memorized some of the lines. They stuck in my mind."

"Loom was not as forthcoming about this," Greb said. "Go on."

"So when he announced his 'Baytown Oratorio' and he got Mr. Paretti to set the verses to music, and we began to rehearse, I saw it right away. This was not Mr. Loom's work. This was Mr. Corman's work. He stole it from a dead man. He lied and said it was his."

"Why didn't the Cormans take the poetry with them when they moved?"

"Maybe they thought it was junk. Maybe they were spooked about going into that room and clearing the desk. I don't know. Anyway, it must have been there when Loom moved in."

"So you threatened to expose him. The revelation would have finished him in Baytown." Greb frowned. "Why five hundred dollars?"

"Why not?" Nancy glanced across her shoulder at the front porch. There was a worn upholstered chair at the far end, half hidden by potted ferns. For the first time, Greb noticed that Jim Maxwell was asleep in the chair, his tired face sagging. Nancy said, "It's no big mystery. I wanted to buy a few clothes."

She got up and took a folded plastic bag from her pocket, shook it open, and began loading in the wilted dandelions. Greb took the bag from her and held it open while the weeds cascaded in.

"Thanks for talking to me," the chief said. "I know everything now. Loom happened to be in the school when Miss Finlayson broke open the lab door to get her scarf. He saw her come out. The idea occurred to him at that moment. He saw how he could get you off his back, save his reputation and his job."

"You believe that's what happened?"

"There's no charge against you. You never took any money. A lawyer could say your intentions were honorable. You threatened Loom to make him go public as to the oratorio's true author."

"Everything will come out at the trial, won't it. People will know."

"Yes." Greb followed Nancy as she walked to the porch and stowed the bulging bag by the screen door.

"Guess who's here, Dad!"

Maxwell came awake and oriented himself quickly. He retrieved the pages of a newspaper from where they had fallen onto the deck.

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"Sit ye down, Chief," he said. "I was just catching up on the news."

Greb lowered himself into a canvas chair. "Can you believe what's going on in the world?" he said.

"Thanks for being there when my daughter needed you."

"It's what a cop does."

Nancy said, "Who wants lemonade?" Without waiting for an answer, she opened the screen door and went inside. For a full minute, she hesitated by the entrance to the kitchen. Then she made up her mind. She went to her bedroom, opened the drawer in her bedside table, and took out the vial of hydrocyanic acid. It was pointless keeping it any longer. It had been a wicked idea to take it in the first place.

Somebody was standing behind her in the bedroom doorway. She turned and saw Chief Greb. He murmured, "I was going to say double sugar in my lemonade."

"Look what I found," Nancy said. She placed the poison on the table and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You surprise me," Greb said.

"Mr. Elfstrom was lecturing on poisons. He showed us the hydrocyanic acid. He said it's also called prussic acid. He told us how quickly it kills. If you must go, it's probably not a bad way."

Greb came to the bed and sat beside her. The mattress sagged. He said, "Why did you take the poison?"

"I'd been feeling very sad. I could never tell anybody how sad. I'm not certain I ever would have used it. But I thought if I put some on a reed, I could keep it. Then, if my mood ever got too heavy . . ."

Greb picked up the vial. "Suicide is the dumbest crime I know."

"I wasn't thinking straight. But I don't want Mr. Loom in jail for something he didn't do."

The chief wrapped the vial in a handkerchief. Carefully, he put it in his pocket. "And young Ted. That was an accident."

"I was in a hurry that morning. He was demanding a reed. I grabbed the wrong one and gave it to him." Nancy thought about what she was saying. She felt confused. Maybe someday it would be clear in her mind. Or maybe not. Perhaps she would never know for sure whether she intended to give Teddy Munroe the poisoned reed.

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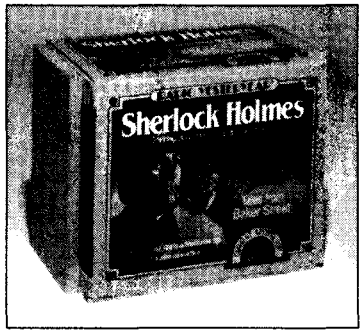

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Massachusetts resident David Ely has covered a wide field in his literary career, with stories in publications as various as Atlantic Monthly, Playboy, *and* Redbook, *on subjects belonging to genres as diverse as horror, science fiction, and crime. If there is a thread that binds his work together, it is his knack for finding a strange angle on events, as in this story of a police inspector who finds the solution to his case in the most unusual way . . .*

DEAD MEN

by DAVID ELY

"Well, here's another one," said Detective Sergeant Knowles as Inspector Bates approached the group of men standing at the corner of Ninth and Park streets. Knowles's assistant, Dunphy, was squatting beside the body. The ambulance was easing up to the curb, its red lights whirling.

Inspector Bates, a big man with heavy shoulders and powerful arms, stood watching, his hands in his pockets and his hat tipped back on his head. The victim had been shot through the heart at close range. The pistol was probably fitted with a silencer. There wouldn't be any witnesses—not in this place, a downtown area deserted after dark.

Sergeant Knowles and Dunphy were going through the dead man's effects while the medics eased the body onto a stretcher. "They sure didn't do it for robbery," said Knowles, examining the wallet. "The guy was carrying two hundred bucks plus his gold watch."

Inspector Bates took a last look at the corpse before it was lifted into the ambulance. Its face bore an expression of frozen surprise, the eyes wide with wonder.

Knowles put the wallet into the evidence bag with the man's watch, keys, and pen. "This makes nine of them," he remarked.

Inspector Bates swept his flashlight beam across the blood-smeared sidewalk. There were more than nine, he knew. Nine this month—but he'd been going back through the files, and there were

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several last month that fit the pattern, and maybe some before that.

Would there be more to come?

Bud Bates was an ex-Marine, a one-time amateur boxer. He considered himself a hard man; hard but fair. He didn't make the rules, but he lived by them—the rules of society, of God, of common decency and custom—and he expected others to live by them too. If they didn't, they had to be caught and made to pay the penalty.

But if they couldn't be caught—?

He was restless and moody at home that evening. It was mid-July and the air was muggy. After he took his Irish setter for a walk, he sat in the darkened living room drinking beer in front of an electric fan, going over the cases in his mind.

At first he hadn't thought there was any connection. A body here, a body there. Every big city had them—murders that led nowhere, isolated crimes without obvious motives, without suspects.

Besides, the weapons were different. Some bullets were .38-caliber, some .45, but no two had been fired through the same barrel.

Still, he had come to sense—somehow he *knew*—that there was a connection somewhere.

If he could find it.

He had studied the victims' backgrounds without coming across anything that struck him as significant. Not that these men were saints. Some had police records, but for petty things—assault, domestic violence, drunken driving, evasion of family support orders. Nothing out of the ordinary. And whenever the police had homed in on a suspect—a business rival or a jealous lover—there proved to be a solid alibi.

It's got to be some nut, he thought. Some crazy bastard with a gun collection who goes around shooting people down for no reason.

A serial killer.

A light went on in the hall. It was Clara, his wife, going to the bathroom. On her way back she paused to look into the living room, then went on without saying anything. Bates heard her close the door to her room and snap the lock.

Sergeant Knowles came into the inspector's office early the following Tuesday, filling the doorway with his bulk. "We got something on this one," he said. There had been another murder the night before. "Shoe-prints. They're kind of smeared, so we can't tell much from them."

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"One of the cops probably made them," said Inspector Bates.

"Not this set. I was there first with Dunphy, and he saw them."

"But you can't tie them to the killer."

"No, not for sure, but those prints were made last night after it rained, and whoever made them, he was standing about the right distance from the body—about ten feet."

"That's not much to go on."

"Wait a minute. We found a second set."

"A *second* set?"

"They were in some mud about thirty yards away, and there were lots of them mixed up, like the guy had gone back and forth. You know. Like a lookout."

"A lookout?"

"Sure," said Knowles. "Why not? Makes sense, don't it?"

"Nothing makes sense," said Inspector Bates. He was troubled. He'd never heard of serial killers who worked in pairs.

It was raining that night, but Bud Bates was a man of habit and went out at the regular time with his dog to make their customary four-block circuit. He couldn't stop thinking about the murders. Were the victims chosen at random? It looked that way. They were virtually a cross-section of society: rich, poor, and in-between; lawyers, construction workers, bartenders, accountants.

The only thing they seemed to share was the way they were killed.

"It's crazy," the inspector muttered. "The whole damned thing's crazy." This was a cop's nightmare. How long could it go on before he got a break—a witness, a solid lead, something definite to go on? The superintendent and the police board were riding him hard, demanding daily reports. The only piece of luck so far was the fact that the media had treated the killings as unrelated events, but this couldn't last long. Every morning he expected to see headlines: MURDER WAVE SWEEPS CITY or NIGHT KILLER STUMPS COPS.

A block from home, Inspector Bates let the setter off the leash. The dog went bounding ahead the rest of the way, where it circled the house, butted its way through a dog door onto the back porch, and waited for him to let it in. Bates shook some dry food into the dog's bowl, and then went to the kitchen for a can of beer. There was only a bottle of orange soda in the refrigerator. He cursed and turned away. No beer? Hell, that was *her* job. Why hadn't she put it on the shopping list? He'd looked forward to that beer. He'd *ex-*

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pected it. Just one goddamned beer, was that too much to ask? She knew he wanted it—needed it—deserved it after putting in a long and frustrating day at work. Why, it was enough to drive a man over the edge, the worry and strain he had, and then a wife who didn't bother to see that he had enough beer, going off to her craft classes and her damned support group, women's stuff, and what about *him,* the guy who paid the bills—what kind of support did *he* get?

He had a daily conference with Knowles and Dunphy, who supervised the background checks and family interviews. Sometimes other plainclothesmen would be called in to report on various aspects of the investigations.

But they found nothing, knew nothing, didn't know in what direction to turn. All they could reasonably be sure of was what it wasn't.

It wasn't robbery. It wasn't drugs, either. Several victims had been casual users, and one was probably a small-time dealer, which might conceivably explain his murder—but not the others.

One victim had a mob connection—and again, while he might have been a gang target, none of the others would have been.

There had to be a motive that fit them all. Otherwise it was mere coincidence, and Inspector Bates found that hard to believe.

But what was left?

"It's got to be thrill-killers," said Sergeant Knowles. "They get juiced up and cruise around, and when they see some guy alone they waste him."

"Could be crackheads," said Dunphy, a lean, sharp-eyed detective who was the best rifle marksman in Indiana, and had a shelf of trophies.

"Crackheads wouldn't leave the money," said Inspector Bates.

"Well, maybe it's like Murder Incorporated," said Dunphy. "They do it for a price, and you pay them out of the insurance."

Inspector Bates shook his head. "Most of these guys weren't insured."

"So if it isn't crackheads and it isn't insurance, what the hell is it?" said Sergeant Knowles. "Maybe it's nothing. We got a string of murders, the only thing they got in common is we don't know who did them, so we figure they've got to be connected—but maybe they aren't."

"There's a connection, all right," Inspector Bates said, but he said it to himself later, after Knowles and Dunphy had gone and he sat alone in his office staring at the stack of files.

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Was he going at this the right way? he wondered. And with the right tools? Knowles and Dunphy were hard workers—they'd done a lot of night and weekend duty—but they were the kind of cops who did best on standard procedures, giving suspects a working-over, digging up witnesses, that kind of thing. Knowles had crossed the line a few times, using rough stuff on people to get the truth out of them, and Dunphy, too, had been in hot water for what the police board called "excessive zeal," but fundamentally they were good loyal men, and you could count on them to hammer their way through the tough cases.

Except these cases went beyond tough.

The inspector usually went to the police gunnery range once a month, but lately he'd been going two and three times a week. Firing weapons was a release. He liked the smell of the guns, liked their power and racket. It took him out of himself; he could forget his troubles there, even though the silhouette targets reminded him of the murder victims. Why couldn't he come up with the answer? What was it he wasn't seeing?

When he finished his turn, he went to the back to watch the others. Dunphy was there, showing off his skills. He could shoot with either hand; even with quick-draw unaimed fire, he always hit a vital part of the silhouette. Dunphy's sister, a policewoman, was almost as good, and some of the other female officers scored high, too. Bates had tried to get Clara interested in shooting—police wives had range privileges—but she never would. She was afraid of guns. She said they made her jumpy. Well, she was jumpy anyway. If Bates entered the room suddenly she'd give a start and pull back—but hell, he was good to her, compared to the way most men he knew treated their wives. All he insisted on was that she do her job. A wife had duties. If she didn't perform them, it was a violation of the marriage vows and the husband had a right to make her do what God and custom intended a woman to do to satisfy a man's needs.

That's all he'd done.

And then two months ago she had moved into the spare room and put the lock on the door.

Thirteen this month—fourteen—fifteen. One was shot in an elevator, another in a deserted downtown parking lot late at night. The

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fifteenth was killed outside a motel. And still no witnesses, still no clues.

The inspector went through the files again, trying to make sense out of them. There had to be a pattern, he thought. Even one of those crazy patterns in which the victims had the same first name or were left-handed or had gone to the same high school.

There was no pattern, though. None that he could see. All he had were the spent bullets, the bodies, and those smeared shoe-prints.

"The shooter and the lookout," the inspector mused. "Two guys."

"Maybe three guys," Sergeant Knowles said.

"Three?"

"Well, there could be a driver. A job like that—hit fast and get out—there's bound to be a driver."

"Why not an accountant, too?" said Inspector Bates sarcastically. "Somebody to keep the score?" But the idea of three killers working together lodged in his mind.

The sixteenth murder of the month took place the following night—and it introduced a new element.

The victim, a businessman, was shot to death in his apartment, apparently after he opened the door to the murderer. The body was found in the front hall by the man's wife and a neighbor woman when they returned from the movies. There had been no robbery; nothing was taken.

It was the first time a man had been shot down in his own home.

"It's got to be unrelated," said Sergeant Knowles. "Some crook figures nobody's home, and then the door opens, so he panics and shoots the guy."

But Inspector Bates suspected that whoever had killed the others had killed this one, too.

Which would mean it was planned.

They knew the man would be alone.

And what about the rest?

Bates had looked for indications of premeditation before, with scant success, but now he returned to the interviews and reports in the files. Had the others, too, been stalked and followed, their movements studied?

Some, he saw, might have been. Victim number fourteen worked late every Thursday. By the time he got to the parking lot where he was shot, it was bound to be deserted. Whoever killed him could have known that. Number seven went to the American Legion hall now and then in the evenings. It was close to his house, so he walked,

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unless the weather was bad. Had someone watched him and figured out that he would have walked home that night? Number ten, killed in the park, was an evening jogger—but the report couldn't establish the direction of the shot. It could have come from the street—but it could have come from the shrubbery, if someone had waited there, someone who knew he'd be coming along.

So . . . if these victims weren't just unlucky bastards who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but had been *chosen*—

Furiously he shoved the pile of folders aside and left the office, cursing and muttering as he drove through the nighttime streets. There had to be a reason. *What reason?* On the way he thought he saw Knowles's car up ahead, an unmarked cruiser. It turned off before he could be sure, but he knew that Knowles and Dunphy were as obsessed with these murders as he was, and they'd be out somewhere, probably prowling the streets half the night.

His own house was dark. He thought maybe Clara was out at a support-group meeting until he realized it would be too late for that. She'd be in bed by now. He stumbled against a chair in the living room, and knocked a table over. "Can't we have any lights in this goddamned place?" he shouted, but she didn't answer. Fuming, he got the leash and took the setter out for the evening walk, but this didn't calm him. The murders walked with him, taunting him in the shadows of the street, making the blood beat in his ears, bringing his breath up quick. He let the setter loose and watched it dart ahead. At home again, he let the dog in from the back porch, and went into the kitchen. There was beer in the refrigerator, but he didn't want beer. He went along the hallway to her room and stood there, his fists clenched. How long had it been? Eight weeks? Nine?

She knew he was out there. He heard her suck in her breath and hold it, waiting to see what he would do.

He kicked the door until the lock broke. Then he entered the room.

July ended, and August began—with another murder. This time there was a witness, but the inspector didn't know whether this was a piece of luck or another source of confusion.

The witness, a young man in his late teens, saw not the killing but what was apparently the getaway car, which sped from the scene shortly before the youth came across the victim's body. He didn't get the numbers on the license plate—it was too dark for that, and besides, he wasn't suspicious then. But he was unshakeable on one point.

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It wasn't an Indiana plate.

Bates sat alone in his office for some time, trying to absorb this piece of information. Out of state? What the hell did that mean? Did it mean anything?

He lifted the telephone receiver and began punching numbers.

First he called his counterpart in Springfield, Illinois, and tried to be casual as he described his problem, playing it down as he spoke. Did the Springfield man have anything similar going on in his jurisdiction?

"Unsolved murders?" said the Springfield detective chief. "Well, sure, we always got some of those. You know, guys shot down. Maybe a few more this summer—five or six, say. How many you got?"

"Oh, a little more than that," said Inspector Bates.

He made other calls to law enforcement men in nearby states. Some reported an increase in murders; some didn't.

Inspector Lundgren of the Akron, Ohio, police told Bates there'd been fifteen such killings in recent weeks. No clues, no suspects, no apparent motives.

"Different weapons each time?" asked Bates.

"Oh, you got that, too?" said Lundgren.

Bates got similar reports from acquaintances in Louisville, Columbus, and Peoria. And his second cousin, Johnny Bates of the Grand Rapids, Michigan, police, told him they'd had six shooting deaths in July and three already in August. "You tell me, Bud," he said. "What's going on?" Inspector Bates said he was damned if he knew, but at least the newspapers hadn't done much with it, which maybe wasn't so strange, because there were twenty thousand murders in the U.S. every year, so a few dozen more wouldn't make a big difference.

Except he knew it might be more than a few dozen. A lot more. He thought of calling other cities—Seattle, Boston, El Paso—lots of places. But he decided not to. Not now. He really didn't want to know.

That night he broke into Clara's room again.

The next day he went to the superintendent and offered his resignation. "I don't know what this thing is, Jack," he said. "All I know is I can't handle it. You'd better get somebody else in here."

"Easy, Bud," the superintendent said. "What do you need? Extra men?"

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"Damned if I know what I need. Every time I think I got part of the answer, something comes along that turns it upside down." Bates sat in the chair on the other side of the superintendent's desk. "All I've got is pieces, but I can't make them fit." He gripped the edge of the desk so hard his fingers whitened. "And now there's this out-of-state angle. What does that mean? They come in from the outside and do it?"

"That kid who saw the license plate? That's just one little thing."

"The way I figure it, Jack—and I'm guessing now—maybe it's the way the mob used to operate. You know. Some people from Illinois or Michigan come here to do a job for the locals, and the locals, they go there to do one, back and forth like that, trading off, and they're all hooked up somehow. Some kind of network."

"Hold on, Bud. You're building a lot on a little. If you're saying it's the mob, we'd have known it by now."

"It isn't the mob. The mob leaves signatures. These people don't leave anything."

The superintendent shook his head. "I know you're under pressure, but the idea of an interstate murder racket—you've got nothing to back that up. Hell, that would take a really professional outfit. I don't buy it. It doesn't add up. You don't even have a motive."

"Not yet."

"No motive, no suspects, nothing. And the victims—"

"What about them?"

"There's nothing that ties them together. No link. They've got nothing in common."

"They're all dead," said Inspector Bates.

He didn't see the note right away. The house was dark. He supposed Clara was at one of her support-group meetings again. These women. Why didn't they stay home and take care of their husbands? He fed the setter and took a look in the refrigerator. Nothing to eat except last night's leftovers or a frozen dinner. He went to the bathroom to wash and saw the note, taped to the mirror. Clara had gone to her mother's in Peoria. She didn't say when she was coming back.

He ripped the note from the mirror and crushed it into a ball. Yes, her toilet articles were missing. He strode down the hall to her room. Her overnight bag was gone. So were some of her clothes. And she'd taken her alarm clock and that stupid stuffed bear she kept on the night table. He knocked the table over with a sweep of his hand.

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Damn her! She had no right to leave without his permission! He stood breathing hard, suspicions racing through his mind. She didn't get along too well with her mother. Maybe that was just a story. Suppose she'd gone somewhere else?

He thumbed through the address book beside the telephone in the hall and found her mother's number. She must have left that morning. Peoria was five or six hours away, so she ought to be there by now, unless—

It was Clara who answered his call. He felt a surge of relief through his anger. At least she hadn't lied.

"Clara—it's Bud. How come you—"

"I don't want to talk to you now."

"Wait a minute. I get home and all I find is this note, and—"

"It's too late, Bud."

"Too late, hell." He burst out in fury. "You can't get away with this! I'll give you exactly one day to get back here, understand? And then I'm coming to get you!"

"It's too late," she repeated, and hung up.

Inspector Bates stood glaring at the receiver. Sweat broke out on his face, his chest. In the kitchen the clock chimed. It was ten o'clock. Time to walk the dog. Still trembling with anger, he snapped the leash on the setter's collar and left the house. The air was cool; the quiet night soothed him. He was tired, though. His steps were heavy. He tried not to think of Clara, tried not to think of the murders.

A block from the house on his return, he loosed the dog, which bounded ahead, racing for the dog door on the back porch. It would be waiting for him: loyal and obedient. Devoted to him. Dogs could teach people a thing or two. Once a dog was yours, you could do no wrong. That was love. Clara's mother didn't like the dog; didn't like him, either. She and Clara had their differences, but they'd stick together now. Damned women; they'd gang up against a man.

A car passed by, slow. It pulled over to the curb up ahead. Its motor was still running; its parking lights were on. Maybe it was Knowles and Dunphy waiting for him. Could be another murder had happened. Another victim; another man.

Hell, he thought. Weren't they *all* men? That's what they had in common. They were all dead—and they were all men.

But there was still the *why*. He didn't know why.

No, it wasn't Knowles's car. Besides, it had a Michigan plate—and those two people getting out of the back were women, not men.

One of them was coming toward him.

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Strangers in town, he thought. Probably lost, needing directions.

He'd never seen the woman before. There was a strange, apprehensive look on her face. Must be nervous about approaching a strange man on the street at night, he thought, even though there was her friend standing by the car and another one in the driver's seat.

"Inspector Bates?"

"That's me," he said, and he supposed she must be someone from Clara's group—but then he remembered that it was an out-of-state car.

She reached into her purse as he watched her, puzzled. *How come she knew his name? How could she know?* She was taking something out. It must be a different support group, he thought. Out-of-state. Women who got his name somehow. Got it from Clara, got it from Clara's group. Knew his name, knew about him, knew where he'd be and when.

He stared at what she had in her hand, stared at it as if it were the answer to what he'd been searching for, stared at the pistol pointed his way.

So this was how it happened. Except—

He managed to utter the one word: "Why?"

The woman's hand was trembling, then steadied and held firm. "Rapist," she whispered, and she fired.

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a *NEW* short story by

TERRY MULLINS

Explaining the attraction for him of the mystery form, Terry Mullins refers to the great Edgar Allan Poe and his statement that "it may well be doubted whether human ingenuity can construct an enigma of the kind which human ingenuity may not, by proper application resolve." "Just give us honest clues," says Mr. Mullins. . . .

UNDER HYPNOSIS

by TERRY MULLINS

In his long association with the New York legal system, one of Cheiro Bay's most controversial tasks was the determination of whether or not a document had been written by a person under hypnosis. The first case of this sort involved the will of Harbard Grady.

The case became front-page news long before Cheiro Bay was involved. Grady had been taking very large amounts of acetaminophen for stomach pain. Apparently someone had substituted a combination of codeine and acetaminophen for his regular pills. The codeine was sufficiently strong that when he took his usual large dose, it proved fatal. Since he kept his medicine on his desk, anyone who had been in his house could have made the substitution. Bay was called in when a member of the City Commission was accused of fraud. The nationally syndicated columnist who made the accusation hinted that the commissioner might also be guilty of murder.

Bay was asked to aid in the investigation and was turned over to Captain Adler, a twenty-five year veteran of the force. Just turning sixty, Adler was tough, balding, direct, and intelligent. His vocabulary betrayed the fact that his education had stopped at graduation

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from high school. The names he dropped showed that he had influence in the highest levels of government and finance. Behind a bluff and blunt exterior, he was a smooth operator.

"What do you know about the case?" Adler asked.

"Just what I've read in the papers. Harbard Grady died leaving an estate of eighty million dollars. His last will was written eighteen months ago. It left forty million dollars to the Language Improvement Foundation of which Commissioner Dross is president and CEO, twenty million to Vale Grady, the decedent's nephew, fifteen million to a religious organization, and five million to Commissioner Dross herself. It was witnessed by three domestic servants, one of whom has disappeared. The lawyer who drew up the will and who was also present when it was signed died in a single-car accident two months ago. Dot Kiddy, who is what has been called a nationally syndicated columnist, says she received anonymous information that Harbard Grady wrote his will under hypnosis. She wondered if he and the lawyer might have been murdered and she questioned why Commissioner Dross was left in charge of thirty-five million dollars under the will. Is there more I should know?"

"You've got the big picture. It needs a bit of fine-tuning. The will was not only signed by Grady in the presence of three witnesses. It was also handwritten in their presence."

"I thought it was drawn up by the lawyer."

"It was, but Grady sat at his desk with the lawyer's draft in front of him and copied it, not word for word, but closely. Then he signed it."

"Unusual."

"To say the least."

"Was there an earlier will?"

"Much earlier. Thirty years ago Grady had a will drawn up leaving half of all he owned to a small midwestern college and half to his brother or his brother's heirs. The old will was found in his safe-deposit box."

"Who knew about it?"

"No one, apparently. Neither Grady nor the lawyer said anything about it when the new will was drawn up. His brother may have known, but he and his wife died years ago."

"When did Grady dictate the will to his lawyer?"

The captain shot a sharp glance at Bay. "Now that is a very interesting question. I don't know how you guessed, but Grady had made an appointment to draw up a new will. Four days before the

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appointment, he called up his lawyer and dictated what he wanted in it. The lawyer was just to put everything in legal language. After he dictated it, he asked the lawyer to come to his house the next day with the draft, said he wanted to write the will longhand and have it signed, witnessed, and notarized then."

"What do your handwriting experts say?"

Adler looked quite uncomfortable. "They say that if three witnesses—four counting the lawyer—had not seen Grady write the will himself, they would call it a forgery. The handwriting is something like his, but . . ."

"And have they compared it with Commissioner Dross's handwriting?"

Adler was becoming more unhappy by the minute. "They say it looks like her handwriting."

"And since I have written articles on changes in handwriting under hypnosis, someone wanted me called in. Was it your idea?"

"No, the mayor himself suggested it. I haven't read your articles. I guess he has. You say there are some sorts of changes under hypnosis?"

"That's right. Under hypnosis a person's handwriting sometimes takes on the character of the hypnotist's personality. For example, a person who usually writes very fast will often write slowly and carefully if that is the way the hypnotist writes. It is as if the hypnotist were doing the writing."

"You say *sometimes*."

"Yes. I was careful in my article to point out that hypnosis causes different personality changes in different circumstances. A lot depends on the hypnotist and on the subject. A strong subject tends to retain more of his own characteristics."

"But a person who is weak or dying would have less, I suppose."

"He would certainly be more suggestible, more open to the influence of the hypnotist. Did Grady know Commissioner Dross? Would he have known how she wrote?"

"Yes, on both counts. I don't like it. It just doesn't sound like Pat Dross. I'd like you to meet her so you can judge for yourself."

"I would like to meet her."

Apparently the captain had already made arrangements. The commissioner was in, was free, and was ready to meet Cheiro Bay. In a few minutes Bay and Adler were walking to her office. Captain Adler was feeling better already.

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He beamed at the clerks and secretaries in Dross's outer office and greeted them by name. He walked into the commissioner's office without knocking. Dross greeted him warmly.

Bay sized up the commissioner quickly before being introduced to her. Patricia Dross was shorter than her publicity suggested. Solidly built, wearing slacks and a khaki shirt, she radiated a down-to-earth vigor which had kept her in the public's favor. She was effusive and patronizing to Adler and he lapped it up like a stray cat given a dish of warm milk.

When she turned to Bay, she was no less effusive. Well briefed, she complimented Bay on the work he had done for various law enforcement agencies and expressed interest in the articles he had written.

"I'm especially glad you have been called in on this case," she said. "It doesn't do a politician any good to have scurrilous rumors spread about her. I hope you can set them to rest."

Bay was amused at this interpretation of his task. They spent twenty minutes of unproductive camaraderie and Bay and Adler left.

The captain was enthusiastic. "She's a great gal," he said. "I'm glad you're off to such a great start."

Adler then led Bay back to headquarters and introduced him to Lieutenant Cogbill, who was in charge of the case. The lieutenant was a morose, plodding man who proved to be surprisingly competent. Without preliminaries he spread before Bay photocopies of the relevant documents.

"Here are Xeroxes. They include both wills, recent samples of Grady's handwriting, a letter from Dross to Grady dated two months ago, other samples of Dross's handwriting, and a typewritten letter from the lawyer to Grady with the lawyer's signature. Also there are samples of the handwriting of two of the servants who witnessed the will, Brady's nephew, and Dot Kiddy the columnist. If you want to see the originals of any of them, you may do so."

"I think I will. The color and texture of the ink and the surface of the papers may be important in interpreting pressure, spacing, and angles. But these will do for now. Would it be possible for me to see the late Harbard Grady's home?"

Cogbill was surprised. He obviously considered Bay a technician who would deal with handwriting the way a fingerprint expert deals with fingerprints or a chemist deals with blood samples. Still, he agreed to cooperate. He immediately called the Grady house and

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made arrangements. Then he had a detective take Bay there and assist him. The lieutenant's low-key approach accomplished more in a quarter of an hour than his superior's exuberance had got done in a whole morning's bustling.

Grady had lived and died on the West Side. A neighbor both to Columbia University and Riverside Cathedral, he apparently remained untroubled either by higher education or higher criticism. On the desk where he wrote his last will there still lay letters from the alumni association of the small midwestern college from which he graduated. Beside them was a worn copy of the King James version of the Bible. Protruding from a pigeonhole in the desk was a checkbook.

Bay opened it and glanced at the stubs. There were a check for fifty dollars to Vale Grady, one for ten dollars to a pharmacy, one for two hundred and eighty thousand dollars to a broker. Bay smiled. He couldn't imagine that a millionaire would write checks to his broker in this electronic age. The desk spoke of a simple man who had learned good habits when young and saw no reason to change them for newer, more sophisticated ways.

"Is Harbard Grady's nephew Vale in?" he asked.

A servant who had admitted them and who was still hovering around replied that Mr. Vale Grady would be in shortly.

"How about the two servants who witnessed the will?"

"They are on the third floor packing Mr. Harbard Grady's clothes to be given to the Salvation Army."

"I would like to speak with them."

"Yes, sir. We can take the elevator."

Gretchen Fogel and Hedda Storm were large, soft women who had come to America immediately after World War II and still spoke broken English. Both were incurious, nearsighted, and eager to please. Despite their best efforts to be of assistance, they added nothing to what Bay already knew. He went back to the study to await the nephew's arrival.

When Vale Grady arrived, he seemed out of place in his uncle's quiet and comfortable home. Tall and thin, he had an immense head of silky blond hair, an immature face, and an air of tolerant superiority. He took an immediate interest in Bay's work and showed the first sign Bay had encountered that day of intelligent appreciation of what Bay was trying to do.

"My uncle kept all his correspondence," he said. "The old stuff is in the file cabinet but current material he kept in a hand-carved wooden box over here."

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He picked up the box, teakwood with brass handles and a brass lock, and put it on the desk. He opened it to reveal a jumble of letters and bills. Bay pawed through them without enthusiasm.

"The copies of his replies to others are typewritten. Did he dictate them?"

"Not his personal correspondence. He typed them himself and made carbon copies."

"He did not write personal letters by hand?"

"Almost never."

"That makes it even more strange that he wrote his will in longhand. Did you ask him about it?"

"No. Uncle was stuck in his ways. I never questioned the things he did."

"And he was equally considerate?"

"Quite. When he invited me to live with him four years ago, he made it clear that we should provide one another occasional companionship without either intruding on the other's life. I think he agreed with Ambrose Bierce that intimacy is a relation into which fools are providentially drawn for their mutual destruction. We got along well."

"You are a journalist, aren't you?"

"I write for newspapers. Journalism departments of Princeton, Dartmouth, Stanford, and Michigan tried to make me a journalist. I even did graduate work at Duke. So far I have not won a Pulitzer Prize but editors of the *Times* in London, New York, and Los Angeles are eager for my work."

"Do you know Dot Kiddy?"

"Only by name and reputation."

"Commissioner Dross?"

"I've interviewed her once or twice. She's good copy but not someone I'm comfortable with."

"Did your uncle have any enemies?"

"You wouldn't expect it, but he did. He was a religious man. That often gets people into trouble. For years he had a bitter feud going with Professor Quark, a biblical scholar with kinky views on how the Bible was written."

"Any others?"

"One more, another fanatic who took advantage of uncle's conservatism. There were several thousand-dollar contributions he swindled him out of."

"That's not much for a multimillionaire."

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"It wasn't the money but the principle of the matter. Dr. Carbon played Uncle for a sucker. That was a bad move."

"And how well did your uncle know Commissioner Dross?"

"He and Pat Dross were good friends. He contributed to her election campaigns and she often consulted Uncle."

"About politics or about finance?"

"Both, and other things. Dross is not one of your fire-breathing law-and-order politicians. She's slick. She has support in Asian, Black, Latino, and Jewish communities. She tries to actually get them to work together. She makes them think she's the only person they can depend on. So they all get together and support candidates backed by Dross. Uncle had intense but naive religious convictions. He was a pushover for the racial and religious harmony line. It was one of the big things he and Dross agreed upon. And he had influence among wealthy businessmen. So Pat Dross started most of her fancy schemes by talking them over with Uncle. She's clever."

"You think she used your uncle?"

"All the politicians in New York use everyone they meet. Uncle Harbard knew he was being used, but if it was something he agreed with, he supported the project. Pat Dross never pushed any project he didn't like."

"Tell me about his trouble with Dr. Carbon."

"Jupe Carbon managed to accidentally meet Uncle at a political rally for Dross. He claimed to work for a group called Biblical Morals, Inc. Actually, he was its founder, president, and treasurer—especially treasurer. Uncle gave him a small donation and he went after a six-figure contribution.

"He tried to pretend that Biblical Morals, Inc. was a midwestern fundamentalist organization. He assumed that Uncle was a typical New Yorker who didn't know anything about the Midwest except that food, cars, and ball players come from there to obediently meet the needs of people in the big city. Actually, Uncle had kept so closely in touch with his old college that he knew more about the Midwest than he did about the Bronx. He threatened to prosecute Carbon for obtaining money under false pretenses."

"And Professor Quark?"

"That was less personal. I don't know whether they ever met or not. In the sixties Quark wrote a lot of popular articles about the Dead Sea Scrolls. He had been to Qumran and had talked and corresponded with Dupont-Sommer. He came up with the theory that the Gospel of John was written by Essenes before Jesus Christ was born,

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that Jesus found it when he was in the desert and used it as his own biography. That was what they quarreled over. There's a whole file drawer of correspondence between Uncle and Quark, some of it pretty violent stuff. They were still at it when Uncle died."

"Where does Quark teach?"

"He's retired now, retired in the early eighties. He still writes but he's no longer popular. He lives about three blocks from here."

After his conversation with Vale Grady, Bay set out to find Dot Kiddy. Lieutenant Cogbill managed that easily and set up a meeting for the next morning.

"Why Kiddy?" Cogbill asked. "She had no contact with Harbard Grady. She couldn't have hypnotized or murdered him."

"No, but she is the one person we know who almost certainly had contact with the real murderer."

"Almost certainly?"

"If she really received the information she says she did, then she's had that much contact. There's a long-shot chance that she may have read about Grady's murder and made up the whole thing. I must check out that possibility."

Dot Kiddy was not at all as Bay had expected her to be. She was a plain woman. She wore stylish clothes perfectly tailored, her hairdresser must have furnished his house on returns from his attention to her coiffure, her face and hands had been worked on by experts, yet a thousand dollars' worth of professional attention had left her a plain woman.

She affected a grand manner, swept toward Bay preceded by a heavy scent of jasmine underlined with musk. She greeted Bay with the coquettishness of a debutante and the seductivity of Cleopatra. But she remained a plain woman, graceless, unimaginative, selfish, and shrewd but not intellectual, the kind of woman any man could conquer but few would want to.

She started a tape recorder as soon as he had stated his name and purpose. "I have told Lieutenant Cogbill that I refuse to turn over to the police the information I received about Commissioner Dross," she said.

"That's between you and the lieutenant," he replied. "He thinks you got the information in the mail as you claim. I think you made up the whole thing—in which case Commissioner Dross would have a solid case if she decides to sue you and your publishers."

"I got the information as I said I did, in the mail."

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"Let me see if I can guess what it was like: a typewritten letter with no signature in a plain white envelope, also typewritten."

"That's it. That's exactly how it came."

"That's how it would have come if you had made up the whole thing."

"But I didn't. I get lots of information that way."

"And do you edit or rewrite the material when you put it in your column?"

"No, I print everything word for word as I get it except to bleep out obscene words. You see, I know my limitations. I'm not a great writer. In fact, I'm a fairly dull writer. But the people who send me tidbits each have individual styles. That way I get variety in my column."

"May I see some of those tidbits, some you have already published?"

"Why?"

"I'm interested in such things. I'd like to see about half a dozen you've received fairly recently."

Puzzled but used to yielding to men when it didn't cost her anything, she produced eight typewritten samples and gave them to Bay. "Three of these were written by the same person," he said.

She looked startled. "What makes you think that?"

"As you say, the styles are different. But these three are alike. What's more, I think you wrote them yourself."

She blushed, started to protest, then took a deep breath and lay back against the sofa. "I shouldn't have let you see them," she said.

"It may be a good thing you did. If you will now show me the letter about Dross—I don't want to take it, just look at it—I will know if you wrote it yourself."

She thought it over and opened a secret drawer in an end table. She held the letter up for him to look at, keeping it well out of his reach.

Bay nodded. "You are right. You did not write it. I don't think Lieutenant Cogbill will try to make you turn it over. You may file it with the rest." He rose.

"You aren't going?" she said.

"I must. I have two other places to visit before noon. Thank you very much for your cooperation."

Things were falling into place.

The next person he saw was the Reverend Sarah Anderson, who had not been mentioned by the police, the media, or Grady's nephew,

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but who appeared frequently on Grady's check stubs. Failure of anyone to refer to her piqued Bay's interest, particularly since she was head of the religious organization which figured to receive fifteen million dollars under Grady's will.

Pastor Anderson turned out to be a tall cleric with a raw-boned husband four inches taller than herself. Both were blond as Vikings, somewhere in their forties, and guileless as a couple of three-year-olds. Bay expected a Swedish slurring of the vowels but was met instead with clear Indiana tones which suggested a football announcer. She exuded cooperation from every pore.

Bay had hit pay dirt and had no scruples questioning the fifteen-million-dollar bequest.

"I can't understand it," she replied. "He was always generous to our congregation, but we don't need any fifteen million. I'd have thought he would leave it to our college. They can use that kind of money."

"You didn't know about the will in advance, then?"

"We knew he wanted to write a new will. He had an inoperable cancer which he didn't tell anyone else about and he wanted to put his things in order. That's why he had me round up Carbon and Quark. He wanted to make peace with them before he died."

Bay took a deep breath and asked, "What do you mean by 'round up Carbon and Quark'?"

"The week before he died, he had me bring each of them to his home so he could make his peace with them."

"But I thought no one but the servants, Grady's nephew, and Commissioner Dross had been in Grady's house the week before he died."

"He didn't advertise what he was doing. He had me over when no one else was around and we arranged matters. He had me get Dr. Carbon first. Vale Grady was out and the servants were sent upstairs. I brought Carbon and we talked awhile. Then they went into Grady's study and had a long session. Carbon seemed baffled by the whole thing, but Grady seemed relieved and thanked me.

"The next day we repeated the whole routine with Quark. He seemed to understand better than Carbon, but I think he was a bit amused. Since neither of them knew Grady was dying, I guess they couldn't account for his wanting a reconciliation."

"How long did these private talks go on?"

"Almost two hours for Dr. Carbon and over an hour for Professor Quark. I knew what to expect, so I took along my notebook and worked on my sermon."

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Cogbill shook his head when Bay reported to him. "Do you realize, Bay, that this means we have three more people who could have hypnotized Grady. And one of them stood to gain fifteen million dollars for her church."

"It's not all that bad. There seems no reason at all why either Quark or Carbon would go to the trouble of faking that will. You might suspect one of them of killing Grady but not of hypnotizing him to write a phony will. And I can't see Mrs. Anderson doing it either."

"So Dross is still our chief suspect. The chief won't like that. I'll call Carbon and Quark in for questioning. You seem to have unlocked the zoo."

"I also got a copy of Anderson's congregational newsletter. She types it herself. And I had her write notes to Carbon and Quark for me. Now if you can get samples of their handwriting for me, we'll be all set."

"I'm not sure why you want all this handwriting. The will was written by Harbard Grady himself."

"But probably under hypnosis, don't forget that. I'll give you an offprint of my article. I think you'll understand."

Bay went to the public library to find something written by Carbon or Quark. There was a lot by Quark, mostly written in the sixties, but nothing by Carbon. If the New York Public Library couldn't find books by Carbon, Bay was willing to conclude the doctor hadn't published anything.

Bay skimmed through Quark's books and articles, photocopying freely. The man wrote with a patronizing sneer. He could take a paragraph of Dupont-Sommer and elaborate it into an article. His style was pedantic and condescending, defensively dogmatic, and full of irrelevant references to the gods of the sixties—Nietzsche, Freud, Huxley, and Bultmann. It was, however, grammatically correct, almost painfully so. Bay was eager to get hold of a sample of his handwriting. He was less eager to meet the man himself.

It was Carbon who showed up first. He seemed cautious and half fearful. Cogbill was used to dealing with people uncomfortable in the presence of the police. Without saying that it was routine, he gave the impression that Carbon's statements were small but helpful parts of a jigsaw puzzle and he was glad to receive them.

Carbon himself was unimpressive. He looked even a bit seedy. Of medium height and somewhat overweight, he was balding slightly at the back of his head. Long streaks of black hair tinged with gray

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had been drawn from the right side to cover the bare skin.

"I understand that you met with Harbard Grady the week before he died," Cogbill said.

"I did, but he promised it would be confidential."

"He kept his word. We had a hard time even finding out about it. What did you talk about?"

"It was personal and has nothing to do with his murder."

"That is for us to determine. We need to know what was on his mind before he died, what his outlook was."

"I see." Carbon stood working his way toward a decision. Cogbill waited him out.

Finally Carbon said, "Some time ago he and I had a disagreement. He wanted to patch up our differences."

"And did he?"

"Oh yes. We had a long talk and parted on the best of terms."

Bay expected Cogbill to ask the nature of the disagreement, but the lieutenant took a different line.

"How did he seem to you at the time?"

"Frankly, he seemed distracted. I got the impression that he considered our talk very important and that he was eager to heal any wounds, but his attention seemed to be somewhere else. He had to force himself to concentrate on what we were saying."

"Could he have been under hypnosis?"

"Goodness no! Nothing like that."

"How about a posthypnotic suggestion?"

"No. I'm sure it wasn't that. He had something on his mind."

"Would you have known?"

"If he had been hypnotized? Certainly. I've seen people hypnotized and have hypnotized some myself. Harbard was not under hypnosis when I talked with him."

"Thank you. We'll have a summary of your statement typed. Please sign and give your present address, the date and place of your birth, and the name of someone we can contact who would know where you are if we can't reach you."

Bay had suggested most of the things other than signature. He wanted a fair sample of handwriting.

When Carbon was gone, Cogbill looked at Bay and said, "So he knows all about hypnosis! And he was alone with Grady for a couple of hours. That's interesting."

Quark and Dross came in together. They had met in the corridor, Dross on her way to see Bay and Quark to give his statement to

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Cogbill. Bay, who had wanted to be in on the conversation with Quark, was confronted instead by the commissioner.

"Have you convinced the police that I had nothing to do with Grady's will?" she asked.

"It isn't that simple, I'm afraid. The will was almost certainly written under posthypnotic suggestion."

"Lieutenant, I'm not sure why you want a statement from me," Quark said, taking a seat not far from where Bay and the commissioner stood.

"Because you spoke with Grady during the week before his death. All information relating to his activity that week is important to our investigation."

"Look, Bay, I don't know a thing about hypnosis except what I learned from your article and I didn't even know about the will until after Harbard's death."

"That may be so, Commissioner, but even the police handwriting experts see your influence in the script of the will."

"There couldn't have been anything in that will that suggested I influenced it." Dross was cautious.

"I have a photocopy of the will. Let me explain what the connection is." Bay spread the papers on an empty desk.

"I'm willing to cooperate, Lieutenant," they could overhear Quark telling Cogbill, "but my meeting with Grady was just between two scholars and couldn't have lasted over half an hour."

"We have been told it lasted more than an hour. Anyway, we need all the information on Grady we can get."

"Our talk concerned some books I had written and some correspondence we had about them."

"How did he seem? Alert?"

"He was alert enough. I had a feeling he had something on his mind he was holding back, but I didn't want to go into it. We agreed to disagree and parted amicably."

"Did he look as if he might have been hypnotized?"

"He didn't look dopey or anything like that, not like a robot. I'm not sure I know what a hypnotized person looks like, but Grady looked normal to me."

"Thank you, Professor. Our secretary will type up your statement and ask you to sign it and give certain information."

Bay drew Dross's attention back to several words in the manuscript. "The most obvious thing is the crossing of the final *t*. In every instance there is a wide swing from the bottom of the *t* over the top without touching it and then curving sharply down and

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across the *t* and well beyond it. You do recognize that as the way you write, don't you?"

"That does look like the way I cross my *t* but anyone could imitate it easily enough."

"That's the whole point. There was no reason for Grady to imitate your handwriting if he was simply sitting down to write his will. There are other similarities, too. Look at the final *g* in the words of the will. It swings way back to the left and down into the space of words below it. I'm sure you recognize that as your style, too."

"I guess that's my *g* all right. But look at that capital *w*. I never made a *w* like that in my life. It's just three big loops."

"You are right. I have pointed that out to Lieutenant Cogbill. There are several other letters which are markedly different from yours. What we have is a lot of letters which are almost identical with your way of writing and several which are totally different. Both facts are important."

"And all of it was written by Harbard Grady? It's important to me that you figure out what is going on. An elected official can't afford to have charges made against her. If they are made, they should be answered at once."

Dross watched as Quark read and signed his statement. When he had gone, she asked, "What's the professor doing here? Is he connected with the case?"

"He talked with Grady in the week before Grady's death. Do you know him?"

"I know everyone who has any political influence in the city. He used to be a darling of the left. They used him to keep the higher-education crowd in line. He never had as much political clout as he thought he had and he has less now, but he can be mean and nasty. It's a good idea to keep on friendly terms with him."

The commissioner stayed on for another quarter of an hour, discussing the case with Cogbill and Bay. When she left, Cogbill said, "She's worried."

"She has a right to be. The publicity isn't doing her any good."

"Here are the statements by Quark, Anderson, and Carbon. Do their handwritings tell you anything?"

"They'll tell me a lot when I finish analyzing them. I think we are closing in on the killer. And I'm afraid it's a multiple killer."

"The lawyer, too?"

"The lawyer and the missing servant. I know you are checking unidentified bodies that were discovered at the time the servant

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disappeared. I'm sure you will find one that fits the description."

"We've already found three homeless elderly men who died about that time. We're checking their prints against those on shoes in the servant's closet."

"Shoes?"

"Yes. We couldn't find his prints anywhere else, but three pairs of shoes had good prints on them."

"Good work. I'd like for you to see Grady's pharmacist and find out what medications Harbard Grady used in the past few years."

"Do drugs show up in handwriting, too?"

"Sometimes, but the point is that we know he was dying. It's likely that some symptoms showed up years ago and were treated. It might be worth tracking down. Also ask how the individual prescriptions were paid for."

"I'll do all of that, but I think you already have an idea of who killed Harbard Grady. I think you ought to share that idea with me. It could be dangerous to be the only one who knows the killer."

Bay laughed. "All right," he said, "I admit it. After talking with all those who dealt with Grady just before his death and seeing what they have written, I'm sure I know who killed him. The evidence is in the will itself, the handwritten will of Harbard Grady."

Bay took photocopies of the three pages of manuscript and spread them on the table. "Look at the phrases I have circled," he said.

Cogbill read them: "I authorize my executor, Patricia Dross, to unconditionally sell any property or instruments I have an interest in; to retain any original investments or other property I have an interest in . . . I appoint said Patricia Dross to serve as executor of this will and trustee of any and all trusts that need to be dealt with . . . said Patricia Dross to independently manage, sell, or exchange as she sees fit all said property that she shall have control over."

"There are other things," Bay said, "such as similarities in handwriting to which your own experts can testify, but those few phrases tell us all we need to identify the hypnotist and the killer."

"They are the same, then?"

"Absolutely!"

Cogbill studied the will carefully and his face relaxed for the first time in days. "I see what you mean," he said, "and I think I know what you want from the pharmacist. We should be able to dig up a lot more evidence now that we know who it is." He turned to get the process started.

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* * *

Later Bay was called back to headquarters. As he walked toward the meeting room, Captain Adler fell in step beside him. "That was clever, Bay," he said. "We're ready to make an arrest. First we have to tell everyone concerned that the will is phoney. They're all rounded up."

He opened the door and they entered. Adler took a chair beside Commissioner Dross. Bay sat beside Sarah Anderson. Cogbill sat at the head of the table. Vale Grady and Dr. Carbon flanked him.

At a sign from the captain, Cogbill began, "I have to inform you that the will written and signed by Harbard Grady is fraudulent. He wrote under posthypnotic suggestion. This can be proved in court. Commissioner Dross, Mr. Grady, Reverend Anderson, do any of you plan to contest this fact in court?"

None of them did. Carbon expressed their attitude when he said, "If you can prove it in court, there wouldn't be much point in contesting it, would there?"

"No, but I had to establish that matter before I proceed to something more serious. Vale Grady, I arrest you for the murder of your uncle Harbard Grady. I warn you . . ."

Afterward Adler insisted that Bay help him explain to the commissioner how they "broke the case."

Adler was expansive. "The easy thing," he said, "was to prove that he killed Boyle. He drove the servant to a part of town filled with abandoned houses, took him into one, gave him an overdose of crack cocaine, and left him to die. There are three people in the neighborhood who saw him go into the house with Boyle and come out without him. When the body was found, we didn't know who it was and thought it was a nameless druggie. There was no connection with Vale Grady. Once we made that connection, we had him."

"But the will and Harbard's murder?" Dross broke in.

"I'll let Bay explain that."

They looked at Bay and he said, "Vale Grady lived off of his uncle for four years. He probably hoped to inherit millions, but they were never close and their values were as different as nightclubs and church socials. When the old man learned that he was dying, he decided to make out a will leaving his money where he felt it would do the most good. He probably told his lawyer of his intentions and then warned his nephew to expect nothing.

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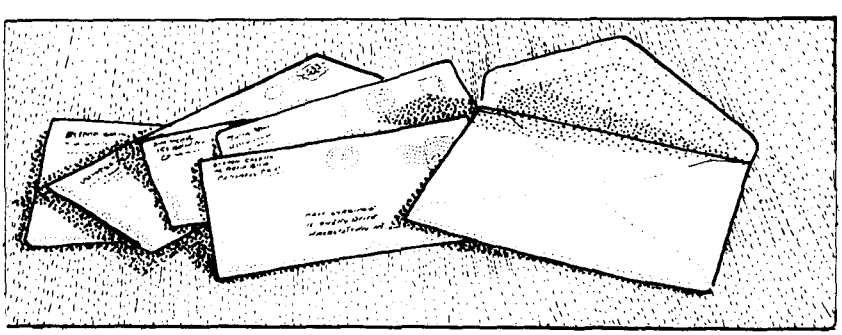
"So Vale Grady conceived the idea of having his uncle write a will under posthypnotic suggestion in such a way that all suspicion would fall on Commissioner Dross. He used a hypnotic drug to hypnotize Harbard Grady, probably slipping it into something he drank. Then he had him practice copying a letter Dross had written. He had his uncle, still hypnotized, call his lawyer to rough out a will with certain provisions and bring it for use as a model. Then he gave a posthypnotic suggestion that at a given signal, his uncle would write a will in Dross's handwriting.

"It worked, but there were eight small letters and many capitals which Dross had not used in her letter. In writing those letters, Harbard Grady lapsed back into his nephew's way of writing. More important, he wrote in the manner of the hypnotist. That was the big giveaway. Vale Grady in his speech and in his writing frequently ends sentences with a preposition and splits infinitives, something the old-fashioned Harbard Grady would never do and which Commissioner Dross doesn't do either. I pointed out to Lieutenant Cogbill the most glaring examples of that practice in the will. There were others scattered throughout. This indicated Vale Grady as the hypnotist."

Adler took over. "Knowing that, we were able to track down Vale's purchase of the hypnotic drug."

"That was well done, Chief," the commissioner said. "What will become of Grady's eighty million dollars?"

Adler looked at Bay, who replied, "Under Grady's real will, since Vale Grady cannot inherit, it all goes to Harbard Grady's alma mater, the small midwestern college which no doubt still teaches its students not to end sentences with prepositions and not to split infinitives."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

So much is being published in the crime-mystery-suspense field these days, and so many worthy new writers are being introduced, I've often thought even that great speedreader Anthony Boucher would have been hard-pressed to keep up with them all. In an effort to play catch-up, all of the subjects of this issue's "Jury Box" will be writers, some new, others well-established, never before reviewed in this space by the present juror.

**** David C. Hall: *Return Trip Ticket,* St. Martin's, $16.95. This impressive private eye novel is unusual in at least three ways: it is very short at 146 pages; it carries an introduction by another writer (MWA Grand Master Donald E. Westlake); and its author is an American who has had several books published in Spain but none in his native country until now. American private eye Wilson, a chubby and unglamorous figure in the tradition of Hammett's Continental Op, hunts in Barcelona for the wandering daughter of his agency's client and catches up with her in the American Southwest. Hall's prose is sharp and evocative, his characters acutely observed, his plot a model of clarity despite a tricky flashback/flashforward narrative structure. Westlake's heavy claims for the novel's quality are more than justified.

*** Corinne Holt Sawyer: *The Peanut Butter Murders,* Fine, $18.95. Angela Benbow and Caledonia Wingate, residents of the upscale Camden-sur-Mer retirement community near San Diego, are a charming pair of senior citizen sleuths. In their fourth case, they look into the death of Alexander Lightfoot, the somewhat younger fiancé of one of their neighbors, who is run over by a speeding train. The role of peanut butter in the plot is remote. Like too many contemporary whodunits, the story comes up a twist short—if you're going to write a comfortable cozy, why not at least try to produce a surprising murderer? But this is only a mild complaint. One of the author's achievements is making life in a posh retirement home look downright attractive.

*** Marisa Piesman: *Heading Uptown,* Delacorte, $18.95. In her third adventure, New York attorney Nina Fischman becomes executor of the estate of Mark Hirsch, a non-drinking diabetic who died in a suspicious traffic accident while apparently drunk. Nina engages in sparkling dialogue with her retired schoolteacher mother while becoming involved with the problems of the victim's stylish and irresponsible widow and precocious, unhappy teenage daughter. As in some of Sharyn McCrumb's books, and many others in the current market, the very slight mys-

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tery plot seems merely an excuse for a collection of humorous social observations. When they're as entertaining as Nina's, though, few readers will complain too strongly.

** Arthur Marx: *Set to Kill,* Barricade, $17.95. The first mystery by Groucho's son concerns Gabe Steele, an ageing TV writer having trouble finding work in youth-crazed Hollywood who takes a job as manager of an exclusive Beverly Hills tennis club and turns detective to investigate a series of thefts and the subsequent murder of a retarded locker-room attendant. The novel has such an old-fashioned feel—with a few changes here and there, the publication date could have been 1940 rather than 1993—that a very explicit sex scene involving Gabe and secretary Jenny Ho comes as a distinct shock. Marx uses his background and arranges his suspects agreeably enough, but the ending is a serious letdown.

** Catherine O'Connell: *Skins,* Fine, $20. In another promising but ultimately unsatisfactory debut, New York homicide detective Karen Levinson investigates the murder of a glamorous fur model, possibly the work of an animal-activist serial killer. The controversy between the fur business and the militant "Save Their Skins" animal-rights group is effectively exploited as a background, and the large cast of characters hold the reader's interest. On the downside, I didn't believe the relationship of Levinson and her sexist male partner for a minute, and the main villain's identity is all too guessable.

Richard Stevenson's 1992 novel *Third Man Out,* recently reprinted in trade paperback (St. Martin's, $8.95), is the fourth book and first since 1986 about one of the best of the gay male sleuths, Albany, New York, private eye Donald Strachey. Stevenson is a good writer, managing to deal with some of the grimmest contemporary realities (including AIDS and the controversy over "outing" of closeted gays) with humor and humanity. In the climax of a well-woven puzzle, Strachey comes up against one of those tests of the private-eye code that remind you of *The Maltese Falcon.*

A new reference book is at hand that is expensive but worth every penny to the serious collector or historian of detective fiction. Ellen Nehr, one of the most capable and accomplished reviewer/commentators to emerge from mystery fandom, has produced *Doubleday Crime Club Compendium* (Offspring Press, 75 Millthwait Drive, Martinez, CA 94553; $75), which provides bibliographic detail and reprints jacket blurbs (with a few unlocatable exceptions) of all the Crime Club offerings from the imprint's beginning in 1928 to its end just two years ago. Each year's listing begins with an overview providing many unfamiliar biographical notes about Crime Club authors, and the substantial overall introduction provides a good short history of the imprint with reminiscences from its editors, one

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of whom was the renowned light versifier Ogden Nash.

The American Audio Prose Library produces cassettes of interviews with and readings by notable authors. One of the few mystery writers chosen as a subject is James Crumley, who is heard in an informative and well-conducted interview with Kay Bonetti and reading a couple of chapters from his novel *The Last Good Kiss*. The beautifully-wrought Crumley prose will undoubtedly attract new readers to his books. Each cassette runs slightly over an hour, and they may be ordered separately ($16.95 each) or as a set ($28) from American Audio Prose Library, P.O. Box 842, Columbia, MO 65205; 1-800-447-2275.

Also on cassette is a sampling of the work of a renowned British playwright who is one of the most effective parodists crime fiction has ever seen. Tom Stoppard kids the conventions of the formal Golden Age British detective story along with the foibles of drama critics in a radio version of his 1968 stage play *The Real Inspector Hound*, while espionage of the le Carré school gets a similarly devastating treatment in the original radio play *The Dog It Was That Died*. (Both are from BBC Cassettes, distributed in this country by Audio-Forum, 96 Broad Street, Guilford, CT 06437.)

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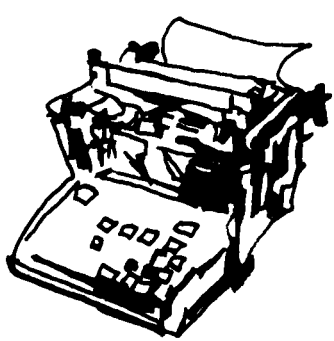

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Elizabeth Moon got her start in 1986 writing short stories for Analog Science Fiction and Fact, *and has since gone on to write a string of successful novels, of which* Hunting Party *(Baen, July 1993) is the most recent. Although she is primarily a science fiction and fantasy writer, this venture into things criminous shows her to be equally adept in our genre. . . .*

FENCING IN

by ELIZABETH MOON

Paul and Ernest had this thing about fences. It maybe started when Paul's daddy used to make him work on fence, before he started driving for the rock cutters. If you've built a lot of fence, and worked a lot of fence, maybe you see more in a fence, but what they used to do, Paul and Ernest, was talk like every fence in the country was a woman.

Tight. Loose. Too long. Mean-looking. Things like that, and then they'd laugh. And chunk gravel at me if they caught me listening. Sometimes anyway. Mmm, Paul'd say, how'd you like the way that corner's set? And then Ernest, he'd grin and sit back and say, Well, I don't know as I like it that much, but it's better'n some. Then again, it's built right. She sure is, Paul would say, and they'd bump elbows and laugh.

The way I heard all that was being in the pickup, mostly in back with Paul's dog and a couple of sacks of feed or salt blocks or whatever he'd driven into town for. That's how I know they called a stretch of fence on the state highway Lucy, and another Maysie, and a bit of fancy secondhand oil-field pipe painted silver R. K. for Roxanne Kriger. Lucy was an old sagging three-wire fence on rotted-out posts, leaning out over the bar ditch where sixty years of hungry cows had reached for a meal. Maysie had cedar posts on fourteen-foot centers, and good tight square-wire with a line of barb on top. Not a goat fence, but the kind of fence that keeps you out of trouble with the constable, even if the fellow across the way has a pretty stout bull.

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You might not have recognized the real people if you'd seen them in Pet's Cafe, but I had to admit the names made sense. Even the R.K., since Roxanne wore the fanciest clothes in town over what Paul said was a definitely secondhand skin. He started to say something else and caught my eye in the mirror. Skin, he said then, and Ernest looked sideways at him and they both laughed.

By the time Paul started driving for the rock cutters, I knew his names for most of the fences around. Lucy, Maysie, R. K., Sally, Tiffany. They colored my view of fences and girls both. It didn't do me any good, because telling Holly that she reminded me of the fence around the Taylor place just made her mad. But she did. She had the same rhythm, when she walked by, as the fence posts make when you drive up that hill and turn the corner. A quick, straight movement, a gleam and shine like new wire in the late sunlight.

By then Paul had left town to live in his own trailer out somewhere in the brush. Ernest had joined the army right out of high school. The only times I saw Paul, Ernest came home on leave and called him, and they drove out together. Paul was good-looking as ever, with dark hair and eyes and big, even teeth like a healthy young mule. I don't know if they still had a thing about fences, because they never let me come along. Truth is, I didn't want to by then. I had sense enough not to tell Joanne what fence she reminded me of, and we had better things to do than follow after Paul and Ernest.

Then Ernest decided to stay in California, and Paul kind of dropped out of sight for a while. At least, I expect I cussed him out on the highway, the way we did all the quarry trucks, but I didn't know which one he was. All those trucks, barreling along a good bit over the speed limit, loaded with hunks of limestone. Some people don't mind, but if you work the highways, either as highway patrol or E.M.S., you mind 'em a lot. Eighteen wheelers, too, running along with worn-out tires and bad brakes, and the driver high on who knows what. A lot of wrecks, a lot of screaming people, a lot of miserable midnight trips.

A lot of fence work, too. Over east of here in the blackland, most of the fields aren't fenced. You go off the road there, you go tearing off into a lot of black glue, but nothing else. A guy I know told me about trying to find a kid thrown from a car, a black kid thrown way the hell out into a black field on a dark rainy night. The mother kept crying for him, and they looked for hours, and it turned out he

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was at his grandma's all the time, but his mother died thinking he had been in the car with her.

Here everything's ranching, and stock, and so it's fenced. Just to think about somebody coming off a motorcycle into a five-strand barbwire fence hurts. The road itself takes the skin off, but those stout five-strand fences Paul and Ernie put up ten years or so back, they'll tear you apart. Pipe fence, that looks so pretty from the road when it's painted white or silver, that's mean too. It'll break, that old secondhand rusted out oil-field pipe, and a long hard finger of pipe pokes into the car that broke it, searching for someone to spear. There's a new fencing out now, high-tension steel wire. Horses bounce off it, they say, and cattle, but a big heavy rock truck doesn't, and the wire springs loose of there, whipping back across the field with all the tension let go at once. Giant rubber band, except it's steel.

Actually I don't know how I got into this work. I was helping out around the place and joining the volunteer fire department seemed like a good idea. They'd saved our barn once. Then the county put an ambulance out here, and the fire department started running it. I hadn't wrecked the pumper the first time I drove it, like some, so they let me drive the ambulance. And then one thing and another, and now I work full time for the county E.M.S.

It gives you a whole different idea of the roads, the land, the people. I used to take Joanne out in my two-year-old pickup, and leave the same black marks on the highway everyone did, fooling the local cop about as much as this year's kids fool me, I suppose. We hotdogged all over the back county roads, spinning out on the gravel and laughing our fool heads off all the time. Back then I thought all the black streaks on the pavement were laid down on purpose by some other young buck. Now I look at a road and read it like my ag teacher used to read our faces when we turned in a project. That's the groove where a tire blew, and the car skidded on the rims. That's where a car burned. That's old blood. I can spot a drunk a mile ahead now, or a crazy kid out having fun. And I can tell how fast the rock trucks go, and I know how hard they'll hit.

Speaking of rock and fences, they used to make rock walls here, a century ago. Some places you can still see them, but mostly they've fallen down. We've only had a few wrecks near them. There's a county road bordered by a rock fence for nearly a half mile, but only one car I know of has hit it. That was a city thief Horace Janson was chasing down the road, and the thief didn't know about the bad

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chughole just before the dip and blew a tire. We never could tell which of his injuries came from the wall and which from Horace, who got there long before the law.

But Paul . . . Paul drove a rock truck like everybody else, which means loaded full and fast. And I hadn't seen him in years, and didn't expect to any time soon. Joanne and I had married, started our family, and—amazingly, these days—were still together. She clerked in the grocery store; I rode the county ambulance. Jennifer was in second grade, and Cody was out of diapers. We had a house on five acres I bought from my dad, and I ran a few cow-calf pairs on his place.

I don't mean to ramble, really, but it is funny, in that kind of way, Paul having this thing about fences and girls and all. You never know what you'll find when you're called out. The dispatcher said it was a truck/two-car with injuries. We found a little foreign car—a Toyota or something like that—squashed between a live-oak tree and a rock truck. Another car had rear-ended the collision—not that unusual. The little car's driver was dead, and the passenger wasn't much better. We were prying the car open enough to get her out when this big fellow put his hand on my shoulder.

"Hey—remember me? It's Paul, buddy."

I looked. He had a bruise over one eyebrow, but that was it—that and the whiskey I could smell. I shrugged and went on working. He grabbed my arm. The highway patrolman was a friend of mine, Keith Jones, and he came over quickly. Paul started to argue with him. I didn't listen. Terri, the black girl who's my partner, had crawled into the car, and I was too busy helping her get the woman out without making things worse to pay any attention.

We had the woman loaded in the unit when Keith tapped on the side door.

"This guy—Paul Fisher—says he's a buddy of yours. . ."

"He knew my brother Ernest."

"He drink a lot?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Haven't seen him in years, not since Ernie's last visit."

"Not really your pal?" I knew what Keith was thinking. Paul was drunk, and he'd killed one person already that night, even if the woman lived. But he needed my testimony too, as far as drunken behavior went. It was hard enough to get a conviction even with an extra witness. Keith waited a moment and went on. "He says you even know his secret name for that old fence."

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I glanced out the back doors to where our flashing lights glinted off a fence a few yards away. "Helen," I said. "That one's Helen." She had had buck teeth and a bad complexion; the fence had crooked posts. It was Helen, I remembered, who had nursed a dying mother all through high school. Even back then I'd known that naming the fence for her was a cruel joke, that she was more than buck teeth and pimples. I looked down at the woman in the ambulance, her face battered and torn by the broken glass and the dashboard. Then I looked at Keith and gave him that little nod. "He's drunk," I said, "and he'll name the prison fence for some damn woman."

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a NEW short story by

LIZA CODY

1992 brought Britisher Liza Cody many honors, including a Silver Dagger for her novel Bucket Nut *from the British Crime Writers' Association, an Anthony award from the Toronto Bouchercon, and an Edgar Allan Poe award nomination for best novel from the Mystery Writers of America. The year also saw publication of the first volume of the British Crime Writers' Association's annual short story anthology to be co-edited by Ms. Cody and writer Michael Z. Lewin. The events of the year occasioned two trips to North America for Ms. Cody, who, as you will see in what follows, is very familiar with life this side of the Atlantic . . .*

WHERE'S STACEY?

by LIZA CODY

"Where's Stacey?" I asked, looking round. I don't go to Manattee Key often, and while I am away I like to think that it remains, as it does in my memory, static: a little world waiting for me to reinhabit it. I am always disappointed. Manattee Key may look like a quiet, subtropic resort, a place designed for well-heeled Americans to retire to, but it has a sublife all its own. Behind every sunny, welcoming door is a snakepit of writhing ambition and discontent. The cafe you love changes hands. The tennis coach you swapped stories with becomes bored with his crop of lessons and leaves to rejoin the professional circuit. Paradise is a frustrating place for those who work there. It is only paradise to those of us who go there to play.

If it weren't for Elaine I wouldn't know much more about what goes on behind the sunny, welcoming doors than any other tourist.

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Elaine runs the pro shop at the Manattee Key Tennis Club. She will sell you your Reeboks, your Fila shirt, your Head skirt, your Wilson Hammer System. She will get your racquet strung to exactly the right tension, she will book your lesson, arrange a fill-in when one of your foursome drops out. She will even tell you the best place to eat if you like Italian. She does most of this all by herself, in perpetual motion between the phone, the clothes racks, and the long white counter, but sometimes she hires part-time help. Last year it was Stacey.

This year, although I have been coming in every day for a week, I haven't seen Stacey, so I ask, "Where's Stacey?"

Elaine is folding sweatshirts and packing them into cellophane bags. She doesn't stop, but her bright eyes brighten.

"Didn't I tell you about Stacey?" she says.

My eyes brighten, too. Elaine is about to tell me a story.

"You haven't heard?" she asks. She knows I haven't.

"Well, Liza," she says, "I had some trouble with that girl, a lotta trouble."

I lean my arms on the counter and settle in. But Elaine isn't ready yet.

"Have you seen Keith?" she asks. "I don't want Keith walking in thinking I'm talking about him behind his back. He liked Stacey, see."

Keith is the maintenance man. They have clay courts at the Manattee Tennis Club. Clay is a beautiful surface to play on, but it takes a lot of looking after. Keith is an artist when it comes to looking after the courts, but he is a touchy man.

I look out the window.

"Keith's busy," I say. "He's talking to Lew."

"Well, I sure hope he's apologising," Elaine says. " 'Cos, Liza, Lew and me, we have been having problems with Keith 'cos he's like this sorta Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character. One day he's nice as pie and then the next day you ask him to do sump'n and he just blows up in your face. Like, this morning I asked him to string a racquet for a lady. This lady needed it for her two o'clock game, and Keith, he snaps at me and says he'll do it when he gets around to it. But he didn't, so this lady never got her racquet and Lew had to lend her one, and she was pissed and I was pissed and Lew was pissed. And Keith, he thinks he can get away with murder, but he can't, see, because Lew and me employ him, not the other way around."

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"Well, they seem to be getting on all right now," I say. I can see them talking quite amiably, their eyes screwed up against the late-afternoon glare.

"Yeah? Well Lew's too soft on him. Just 'cos he's great with the courts."

"Stacey," I say, to remind Elaine.

"Yeah, Stacey," she says. "I had a lotta trouble with that girl, Liza. You remember Stacey? She was young, right?"

"Yes."

"And pretty. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well, some of the older guys thought she was pretty. Older guys go for those little blond girls, don't they, Liza? But Stacey wasn't real smart. So it was like this, see, she got to running around with a funny crowd. She'd tell Keith all about it, see, and he'd tell Lew, and Lew'd tell me. But, see, I din't believe it. 'Nah,' I said to Lew. 'Stacey's a sensible girl.' I mean, I knew she wasn't real smart, but I thought she was sensible.

"But one day, right here in the shop, I got a check back from the bank marked 'insufficient funds.' That's what they write on them here, Liza, when a check bounces—'insufficient funds.' The name on the check was Madder Tungate, and I didn't know the name. Which surprised me 'cos I know everyone who comes in here."

This is true. Elaine knows everyone.

"I din't know this Madder Tungate, but there was a phone number on the back of the check so I wasn't worried. I call the number, y'know, to tell him about the 'insufficient funds,' 'cos he'll want to make good, right? But when I call, this little kid answers, and I ask for Madder Tungate, and the kid says he isn't in and puts the phone down real quick. I think nothing of it. I mean, what do little kids know?

"Anyway, I call again an hour later, and this time a woman answers, and I ask for this Madder Tungate, and she says he isn't home. But I say, 'Tell him to call Elaine at the Manattee Tennis Club.' And she says, 'Sure,' and puts the phone down.

"Well, Liza, later in the afternoon, that same afternoon, I just happened to be looking at the paper, y'know, the *Manattee Observer*. I was looking at the paper, and I saw this name—Madder Tungate! Yeah. Well, he's wanted for murder. Murder, Liza."

Elaine's bright eyes are brilliant because if there is one thing that really turns her on it is real-life crime. Not fictional crime, not

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fictional cops. It has to be real to satisfy Elaine. She tolerates me, even though I only write fiction, because she knows I like true stories too. Real voices telling true stories.

"Madder Tungate," she goes on, "this name on my check marked 'insufficient funds,' is wanted for murder. See, he used to work at some hotel down the beach a way, and he got fired for stealing, and he went back and strangled the manager. He, and this other guy, Mick, they rented a room at the hotel. Mick said he went to the bathroom, and when he came out this Madder Tungate was strangling the hotel manager. Then, he said, Madder intimidated him into driving him to Tampa airport 'cos he wanted to get out of the state. That's what it said in the paper.

"So I looked at the check again. And two days before the hotel manager got strangled Madder Tungate was right here at the Manattee Key Tennis Club buying a sweatshirt! Can you believe that?"

"Astonishing," I say. I know there is more.

"Astonishing. Right," says Elaine, nodding. "So what do I do? Well, I start goin' through all the sales slips. 'Cos where there's a check, Liza, there's gotta be a sales slip. Right?"

"Yes."

"Right. And here was the funny part, Liza—when I found it, half the sales slip was written up in Stacey's writing, and half of it, I didn't know the writing but it looked like the writing on the check.

"Well, Stacey knows, 'cos I told her and told her, she knows no one's supposed to write a sales slip but her. So I thought, 'This Madder Tungate is one of Stacey's friends.'

"And I asked around, and Keith told me—yeah, this Madder Tungate is one of the guys Stacey's running around with, and what's more, she spent the night at his place a coupla days before. But she said nothing happened. 'Like hell nothing happened,' I said, but Keith swears she said nothing happened.

"Anyway, Liza, about this time, there was a cop working here at the club. Cleaning houses. Moonlighting, 'cos his wife runs the cleaning agency that was taking care of the condos. So this cop was in here and I showed him the sales slip, and he said, 'Well, don't you be too surprised if a detective comes in to talk to you.'

"And I said, 'Why would a detective want to talk to me?'

"And he said, ' 'Cos you know Madder Tungate.'

"And I said, 'But I don't know Madder Tungate. He's one of the guys Stacey runs around with. In fact, she spent the night at his place but she swears nothing happened.'

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"And he said, 'You can bet nothing happened. The guy's a confirmed gay.'

"So I says to Keith, 'If the guy's a gay, what's Stacey doin' runnin' around with him?'

"And Keith says, 'She said he was changing.'

"And I said, 'If she believes that, she'll believe anything.' I said, 'A leopard does *not* change his spots.' Ain't that the truth, Liza?

"But, see, I was worried, and what was worrying me was that Stacey's parents had this rented Winnebago and the whole family had gone up north to Pittsburgh on a vacation. And I thought this Madder Tungate had taken a plane out of Tampa and gone to Pittsburgh. And Stacey's parents wouldn't know about the hotel manager getting strangled, see, and they'd take him in.

"So I said to the detective, I said, 'Y'know, you should go look for this Madder Tungate in Pittsburgh 'cos that's where Stacey's at.' "

"And was he?" I ask. "In Pittsburgh?"

"He'd went to San Francisco," Elaine said, shaking her head regretfully.

"And Stacey?"

"Stacey was in Pittsburgh all right, and when she got back I called her up and I said, 'What was this Madder Tungate doing out at the Manattee Tennis Club?'

"And she lied to me. She said, 'I don't know no Madder Tungate.'

" 'Don't lie to me, my girl,' I said. 'I've got his check marked insufficient funds, and that's his writing on the sales slip where it shouldn't be because you're the only one supposed to write on the sales slip.'

"And she said, 'You don't trust me anymore. You're going to can me.'

"I said, 'You got your job. I trust you, Stacey, but I don't trust your friends.'

"And then, a coupla weeks later, one of the members here comes up to me and says, 'Who's that dark-haired little girl working here Sunday?'

"And I said, 'What dark-haired little gal? I don't know any dark-haired gal.' Because Stacey's blond, as you know, Liza, and she was the only one working for me on Sunday.

"So I asked around, see, and Keith told me one of Stacey's friends had been in the club all day. And Stacey let her behind the counter. So I called Stacey to ask her what was goin' on. And she lied to me. She said there'd been no one there Sunday but her. But too many

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people had told me about the dark-haired little gal, see. So I caught Stacey out.

"Then, Liza, then I had this run-around with Stacey's mother. 'Cos you see, Liza, remember I told you our apartment on Cortez was broken into?"

"I remember," I say.

"Well, the woman downstairs saw someone running away carrying something. Remember I said that?"

"Yes."

"Well, when all this about the hotel manager getting strangled happened I remembered what the woman downstairs said. And I thought the guy she described matched the description of Madder Tungate. So I asked Stacey's mother if she had a picture of him I could show the woman downstairs. But you know what, Liza, she got real uptight. Sure she had a picture but she said I couldn't have it. Which made me think.

"So then I said to Stacey, 'Listen, Stacey, is there any way this Madder Tungate coulda got Lew's and my address?'

"And she said, 'No way at all.'

"But she made a mistake, see. She asked what was taken in the break-in, and I told her, 'The VCR, the video camera, all that electrical stuff.' And all of Lew's tennis trophies, Liza, which was real mean. They even took his Wimbledon medal, and that medal meant a lot to Lew."

"I know," I say. "I remember him telling me."

"Yeah, right," Elaine says. "Well, when I told Stacey about the VCR and stuff going in the break-in, she made this mistake. Y'know what she said? She said, 'Oh, Madder doesn't take electrical goods and that sort of stuff. He takes furniture and paintings.'

"I mean she *knew* he stole! And she still ran around with him! She said he drove a black car with tinted glass, and he wore black clothes and dressed real funny so he wouldn't be seen at night. She knew all of that and she *still* ran around with him!

"Then Stacey said, 'You're going to let me go, aren't you? You don't trust me anymore.'

"And I said, 'I trust you. It's your friends I don't trust.'

"But she came in here the next day when I wasn't expecting her and told me she was quitting. See, Liza, she was bored with the job."

"Bored?" I say.

"Yeah. She said it was boring and I guess maybe if she was so bored that was why she ran around with Madder Tungate."

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"What happened to him?" I ask. "Was he caught?"

"Nah," Elaine says. "The cops tracked him as far as a motel in Palm Springs and then they lost him."

"And where's Stacey now?"

"Well, Liza, that is kinda funny. Coupla months ago I got this letter from the hotel down the beach. Y'know, the one where Madder Tungate strangled the manager. Well, the new manager there wrote to me saying Stacey wanted to work there in reception. She gave him my name for a reference."

Elaine grins at me, and I grin at her.

"I lost the letter," Elaine says. "I lost it before I could write the reference. But I heard Stacey got the job anyway. Nothing I woulda said coulda made much difference. They're not real careful who they hire down there."

ON OUR COVER

Our photo session with bestselling author Sue Grafton was just a whistle stop on a nineteen day, cross-country tour that took the author to thirteen cities. According to Pamela Duevel, publicist for Ms. Grafton's publisher, Henry Holt & Company, in some bookstores the author signed up to 300 copies of her novels at a sitting.

The phenomenal success of the series of mystery novels featuring California P.I. Kinsey Millhone is not difficult to explain in view of the excellent writing, compelling plotting, and utterly contemporary characters to be found in each installment. Says Ms. Grafton of her street-smart, irreverent sleuth: "She's thinner and younger and braver than I. Still, I like to think she's the person I would have been if I had not married young and had children. Through her I can explore all sorts of feelings that I'm sure other women share. Questions about independence, ambivalence about parents, attitudes towards men, issues of morality, all those juicy ideas that seem to seep in from the right side of my brain while I'm figuring out the mystery plot."

This May, the tenth entry in the alphabet series, *"J" is for Judgment,* was published to critical acclaim. At the current rate of one book per year, the series will conclude in 2009 with *"Z" is for . . . ?* We'll just have to wait and see!

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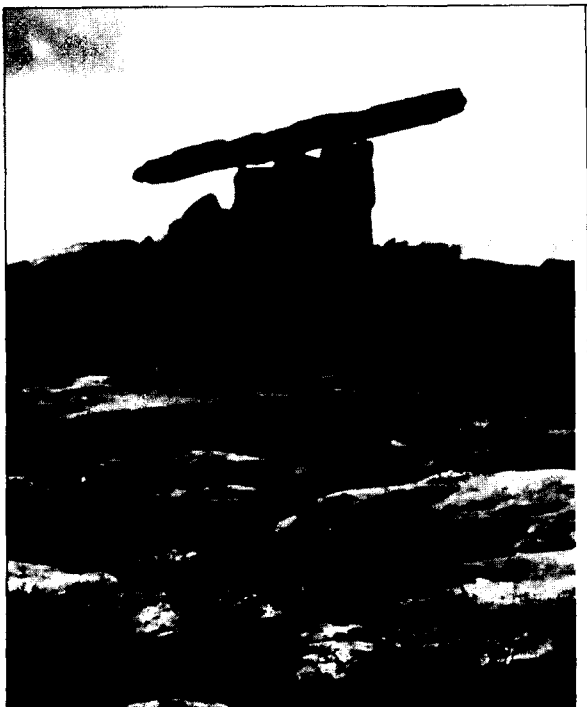

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a *NEW* short story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Once in a while, we get from veteran EQMM *writer Ed Hoch a story that does not continue one of his ongoing series but introduces entirely new characters and themes. Here is one with an unexpected twist. . . .*

NOW YOU SEE IT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

At eleven A.M. on a sunny morning in July, Karen Holden took a deep breath and walked out the door of the medium-security women's prison at West Orange. Well, she decided, at least it's a good day to be starting a new life.

There was a bus stop near the prison gate and she waited about ten minutes before the bus came along, then boarded it with a stout black woman who'd also come through the gate. There was only one empty seat and the woman sat next to her.

"You get out today too?" the woman asked Karen.

"Yes."

"How long you been in?"

"Two years."

The woman grunted. "That's easy time. What'd you do?"

"Took some money from the place where I worked. The judge gave me two-to-five."

"So you on parole now? Think you can get another job?"

"I'll try," Karen answered.

"Gonna live in West Orange?"

She shook her head. "Highview."

"Nice little city. Had a boyfriend there once." She stared out the window at the passing scene, perhaps remembering him. "When you gotta report to your parole officer?"

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"Next week."
"Good luck. I'm gettin' off at the next stop."
"Good luck to you, too," Karen told her.

Arrangements had been made for a little one-room apartment in downtown Highview, in an integrated neighborhood where no one asked questions about people's backgrounds. The building superintendent knew nothing about her, but tenants who were ex-convicts probably wouldn't have surprised him. His name was Felix Lottner and he moved with a shuffling step that made him seem older than he looked.

"One room furnished," he said, unlocking the door for her. The furniture consisted of a sofa bed, a kitchen table, a coffee table, three chairs, a stove and refrigerator. There was one picture on the wall, a faded color print of a fawn sipping at a mountain stream. "Does it meet with your approval, Miss Holden?" he asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"It'll be fine."

"How long do you intend to stay?"

"I don't—don't know yet."

"Rent is a hundred a month plus utilities. I'll need the first hundred now and another hundred for a security deposit."

She took out two hundred dollars and handed it over with some reluctance. "Could I have a receipt, please?"

"Sure, little lady. Happy to oblige."

She closed the door and bolted it after he'd left. Something about him gave her the creeps. Then she walked to the window and studied the view. There was a market across the street with fresh fruit and vegetables out in front. That was something, anyway. She'd rather not think about the room itself, hoping only that she wouldn't have to be there very long.

Karen spent the weekend fixing it up, and on Monday morning she answered a few want ads in the newspaper, looking for a job. Then on Tuesday it was time to meet with her parole officer for the first time.

His name was Tom Rosso and he looked more like a high-school teacher than a parole officer. He had a quick and friendly smile, with pale blue eyes behind glasses that he frequently removed as he spoke. She could picture him writing a math equation on the blackboard.

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"Good morning, Miss Holden. You're very prompt. Please take a seat."

She sat down opposite his desk. "Thank you." She glanced around at the frosted glass walls that separated them from the other cubicles. "You don't have much privacy here."

"Oh, it's quite adequate." He flipped open her file as if examining it for the first time.

"I'm very conscious of privacy after spending two years in a dormitory with twenty-three other women."

"I understand that," he answered with a smile. "Let's hope you never have to go back there, or to a worse place. Now tell me, have you gotten settled in?"

"I took a small apartment." She gave him the address, though she suspected it was already in the file he had before him.

"No thought of going back to your family?"

"I'm twenty-eight years old and my family lives in California now. I prefer to stay back East and on my own."

"Very well. How about a job?"

"Yesterday was the first time I looked. I didn't come up with anything right away."

"There's a knitwear company in Passtown that's quite good about hiring ex-convicts, if you don't mind running a machine."

"I was hoping for an office job. That's where my experience is."

"Well, keep looking. Let me know if you need any help." He made a notation in the file on his desk. "You'll be making monthly visits here. The secretary outside will set up your next appointment. In addition, I'll probably stop by your place some evening next week to see how you're getting along. You're an attractive young woman. I don't think you'll have any problem making a fresh start."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a quick smile.

The weather stayed warm the rest of that week, as it often did in July along the east coast. Karen made a few halfhearted attempts to find work, mainly so she'd have something to tell her parole officer when he called. On Sunday afternoon, as she was taking out the rubbish, she encountered the building superintendent for the first time since moving in.

"Hello, Miss Holden," he called, seeing her at the big dumpster behind the building.

"Oh! Hello, Mr. Lottner. You startled me."

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"Didn't mean to do that," he said, coming closer. "How's the apartment? Any complaints?"

"No, everything's fine."

"I see you around during the day. No job yet, eh?"

"I'm looking," she assured him, turning to leave.

He smiled at her, revealing a missing tooth, and placed a hand on her bare arm. "Wait a minute."

"Take your hand off me, Mr. Lottner," she said icily, backing quickly away.

"Sorry. Didn't mean anything."

She dumped the rest of the rubbish and retreated back upstairs.

By the time her parole officer came to visit on Tuesday evening she had the place looking halfway livable. Tom Rosso seemed more relaxed away from the office, with not quite the same scholarly demeanor he'd exhibited at their first meeting.

"You've fixed this up very nicely," he told her. "We like to see that. It shows you've taken an interest in your new life."

"I won't be staying here long," Karen assured him. "The building super has a nasty habit of putting his hands on me. I want to get a better place as soon as I can afford it."

"Any luck with a job yet?"

She shook her head. "I know I've only been out less than two weeks but I thought I'd have something by now. I'm starting to get discouraged."

"It's too soon for that, surely! Keep trying and I'm sure you'll find something. There's always the knitwear company I mentioned."

"No, not that. In prison they had me on a sewing machine. I hated it. I need something else—office work or something outdoors."

"I'll keep my ears open," he promised. "Sometimes we hear of companies willing to hire parolees."

"Look at me! I didn't even offer you a drink or anything!" She quickly added, "Nothing alcoholic, of course. A soft drink, or some fruit juice?"

He smiled and removed his glasses. "A soft drink would be nice, Karen."

She took out a couple of diet colas and poured them into the glasses she'd purchased at the supermarket. "These evening calls must keep you away from your family. Are you married, Mr. Rosso?"

"Divorced. I have two sons that I see on weekends." As she set the glass before him, he held up his right hand and showed her a shiny silver dollar. "Now you see it—" He closed his palm and then re-

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opened it. The coin was gone. "—and now you don't!"

"You're a magician!" she said with a bit of awe.

He laughed. "I learned a few tricks to keep my boys amused. They think I'm a magician too."

Karen took a sip of her drink and then put it down. "We had a woman in prison who used to paint clown faces on her kids when they came to visit. I wanted her to paint my face too, so I could escape with them when they left, but she said I was too tall."

"That wouldn't have been wise," he told her, and she saw at once that escaping from prison was not something to be joked about.

"Well, I didn't mean it seriously."

"I hope not." He finished his drink and thanked her for it. "Keep trying for a job, Karen. I'll come by again next week to see how you're making out."

"Thank you for your interest."

"It's part of the job," he said.

Tom Rosso phoned her a week later, in the afternoon. "I'm in the neighborhood and thought I might stop by, if it's convenient."

"That would be fine. I'll expect you."

After she hung up she quickly made the bed and closed it into the sofa. Then she straightened the room and dusted a bit here and there. By the time he arrived it looked quite presentable.

"How's the job search coming?" he asked her at once.

"Terrible, but that's the least of my worries right now. That super, Lottner, has been bothering me again. When he talks to me he comes right up close. He frightens me."

"Perhaps I should have a talk with him."

She just shook her head. "I want out of here. I want to have a decent place as soon as I can afford it."

He sat down on the sofa bed and took out his notebook. "I've been checking around and I've heard about a man who might have an opening for you. His name is Adam Irving, and he's an attorney with a small practice here in town. Mostly he handles accident claims."

"Would I be working in the office?"

"As I understand it, the duties would be varied. But the pay is good and could get better. Here's his address. I'd suggest you give him a call tomorrow."

"I don't know how to thank you!"

"Wait till you get the job before you thank me, Karen."

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The following morning she telephoned the number he'd given her and spoke with Adam Irving. He was a bit abrupt on the phone, but made an appointment to see her that afternoon at three. His office was in a downtown building not far from the parole office where she'd first reported to Tom Rosso.

Adam Irving had none of Rosso's scholarly charm. He was a stocky man with a black moustache and thinning hair, probably in his forties, and his sharp, steady eyes seemed to be analyzing everything she said. At least he didn't turn away when she told him she was an ex-convict. Perhaps he knew what to expect when she'd told him on the phone that Rosso had suggested she call.

"I have an opening for a young woman," he told her. "The job pays two hundred a week to start, with frequent bonuses."

"What does it involve? Office work?"

"This would be more field work, to start. You'd be doing a type of consumer research in supermarkets."

"That sounds interesting," Karen told him, trying to seem enthusiastic. "When could I start?"

"How about tomorrow?"

"Perfect!"

She phoned Tom Rosso at the parole office to tell him she had the job. "That's fine, Karen," he said. "I never doubted for a moment that he'd hire you."

"I don't know how I can repay you for your help."

"You can repay me by building a new life. If anything ever happens to tempt you to repeat your old errors, I hope you'll pick up the phone and call me."

"Don't worry. I've put all that behind me."

Karen started work the following morning promptly at nine A.M. Adam Irving himself drove her out to one of the malls in his fancy sports car, and gave her a long list of survey questions to complete. With a break for lunch, the task took her most of the day. Irving returned a bit after three and found her in the fresh produce aisle. "How are you doing, Karen?"

"Just about finished," she answered.

"Fine! Let's go next door for a cup of coffee."

Over coffee she showed him the forms and explained some of the notations she'd made. "Is this what you wanted?"

"Perfect! It's exactly what I had in mind. How was the store today—crowded?"

"Moderate. Not too bad."

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"Anything unusual I should note?"

"No, it was just an ordinary day. Oh, a woman tripped over a display of dog food and sprained her ankle. That provided a little excitement for a few minutes."

"You saw this happen?"

"I heard everything fall over and ran to where she was. They were helping her back up by that time, but she was yelling for the manager. She wanted him to file a report in case her injury was serious."

"Do you think she could have been pretending?"

"No," Karen replied. "The ankle was really hurting her."

Adam Irving nodded. "Would you be surprised if I told you I was representing her in a lawsuit against the supermarket chain?"

"Lawsuit? It just happened a couple of hours ago."

"Nevertheless, the woman—whose name is Clair Gleason—is my client."

Karen shook her head as if to clear away the cobwebs. "I don't understand any of this."

"Come along back to my office and I'll try to explain."

As they entered Irving's office Karen recognized the woman who was waiting there as the one who'd tripped over the dog-food display at the store. "Hello," she said, a bit hesitantly. "I'm Karen Holden."

The woman gave her a lopsided smile. "Clair Gleason. Glad to meet you."

"I saw you at the store today. I hope you're all right."

The woman snickered. "Nothing wrong that twenty thousand or so couldn't fix."

Karen turned to Adam Irving. "You're suing the store for twenty thousand?"

"Correction: Miss Gleason is suing the store. I am only her attorney."

"Well—were you really injured?" Karen asked.

"I've probably got a few bruises. Taking those tumbles can be hard on the body."

"You've done it before?"

Clair Gleason grinned. "Now and then."

"But aren't there doctors' reports and x-rays in a lawsuit?"

"We manage to get whatever's necessary," Irving assured her. "In most cases the store or auto insurer settles out of court, so it never gets that far anyway."

"Auto insurer?" Karen repeated.

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The attorney shrugged. "People have auto accidents too. They don't just trip over displays in supermarkets."

"I see." She was silent for a moment and then asked the woman, "Do you really get twenty thousand for something like this?"

It was Irving who answered the question. "We'll ask for forty and probably settle for around twenty. The display was too far into the aisle, after all. It was an obvious hazard. Clair will receive ten thousand out of the twenty. Not bad for an afternoon's work."

"Who gets the rest?"

"My fee plus overhead." He waited a few seconds and asked, "Think you'd like to try it, Karen?"

"Who, me?"

"Why not?"

"I'm an ex-convict. I'm on parole."

"But you still have the right to file a lawsuit. Chances are, if the case is settled out of court, that fact would never emerge anyway."

"I'd be scared silly faking a car accident."

"Not a car. We'd start you off on something easy, maybe slipping on a wet floor. Clair could teach you how to fall."

Karen nibbled on her lower lip. "Would that bring me ten thousand?"

"It could, depending on where we stage it. Big chains are always better than independent stores."

"Let me think about it," she said.

"I'd like to know by tomorrow, Karen. This survey business is just about completed. If you don't want to move up to the next rung there's really nothing more for you here."

Clair taught her how to fall.

It wasn't difficult at all after the first few times. Karen imagined that actresses on stage and in the films must practice the fall just like this, if they didn't have doubles. She'd always wanted to be an actress, since she was a little girl, but life didn't usually turn out quite like you planned.

They took her to a big drugstore that was part of a national discount chain. Clair had observed that the area up front by the checkout counters was kept mopped and clean on rainy days, making the floor a little bit slippery. Often they had a folding sign in place to warn customers, but just as often the sign was off to the side where it couldn't be easily seen.

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Clair went in first and nudged the sign behind a candy display. Karen waited five minutes and then ran through the rain to the store entrance, hurrying inside as she brushed the water from her jacket. Her feet slipped from under her and she grabbed for the gumball machine just as Clair had instructed her. It happened so fast and unexpectedly that the clerks came running to her aid, certain she was badly injured. "Chris!" one of them called, and a blond young woman, apparently in charge of store security, appeared to take over.

"Can you stand up?" she asked, gently helping Karen.

"I—I think so, but my back hurts. I must have wrenched it somehow. The floor was so slippery—"

"There was a warning sign. You didn't see it."

Karen glanced around as she stood up, wobbly and uncertain. "I still don't see it."

"Well—there it is, behind that display. It must have gotten moved."

"My back hurts. I'm afraid to walk."

"Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"No. Maybe if I just lean on you a bit it'll be better."

"Here, I'll help you into the office. I have to write up a report on this."

Karen allowed herself to be helped into the tiny office, where Chris cleared off some space on a desk and began filling in a form. "It's feeling a little better now," she said.

"Good! I think you'll be all right." She finished with the preliminary questions and then turned the sheet toward Karen. "I'm authorized to pay you the sum of two hundred dollars if you will sign this form absolving us of any further responsibility for your fall."

"Well—" Karen studied the form. "I don't know if I should do that—" She stood up and tried her back, then winced and sat down again. "I think I'd better wait until tomorrow at least and see how it feels."

The young woman eyed her with some impatience. "Do whatever you think best, but this is as much as you'll get without a lawsuit. And I don't think you want to involve yourself with lawyers and judges and juries."

"Let me see how I feel tomorrow," Karen pleaded. "I'm not trying to rip you off."

She left the store slowly, limping just a bit. Irving and Clair were waiting down the block. "They offered me two hundred dollars," she told them glumly.

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"That's always the first offer. Go back tomorrow and talk to the store manager." Irving started the car and pulled away from the curb. "With a bit of luck he'll offer two thousand."

The following week, at the first of the monthly meetings at her parole officer's office, Karen faced Tom Rosso across the desk and said, "I have a problem with the job you sent me for."

He frowned. "Didn't you phone me to say you were taking it?"

"I did take it! But something's come up that I'm afraid could jeopardize my parole. It seemed like such a little thing at first, but now—"

He smiled at her. "Tell you what, Karen. I've got a pretty busy schedule here but why don't I come by your apartment tonight and we can talk about it. Would that be convenient?"

"Certainly."

Rosso arrived shortly after dinner, carrying the attaché case she'd seen on his desk. "I came right from the office," he explained. "Now what seems to be the trouble?"

Karen sat down nervously. "I thought I should tell you about it because you're the one who sent me to Adam Irving."

"Of course. I've known Adam for years." He smiled gently. "I hope you're not going to tell me he made improper advances like your building super."

"No, no. It's just that he's gotten me involved in something I don't much like." Quickly she narrated the meeting with Clair Gleason and the events at the drugstore. "I've met with the store manager but he wouldn't go higher than five hundred. I'm threatening to sue for ten thousand."

Rosso's face had turned grim as she spoke. "Why are you coming to me now, Karen?" He stood up and began pacing.

"Well, I figure I haven't done anything wrong yet because I haven't accepted any money. But if the store pays me, have I violated my parole?"

He sighed and snapped open the attaché case, taking out a folder with her name neatly typed on the flap. "I like you, Karen," he began. "I liked you from the first time I saw you. This business that got you thrown in prison for two years is the sort of thing that could have happened to anyone. Now you're out and making a fresh start. I certainly can't approve of what Irving is doing, but on the other hand he's helping a great many ex-convicts make a fresh start in life. He's not a bad man."

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"Then you think it's all right for me to go along with this?"

"You'll have to use your own judgment on that. Let me say, though, that nothing in what you've told me would reflect badly on your parole record. I won't even make a note of it."

"Well, I'm certainly more relaxed after hearing that. It's a load off my mind. Can I get you a drink or something?"

"A soft drink?"

She looked a bit shy. "I have beer too," she said softly.

"Perhaps a beer, then."

Karen retreated to the little kitchenette and returned with two beers and a pair of glasses. She thought Tom Rosso brushed his hand against her leg as she set them down, but it may have been accidental. She sat down beside him on the sofa, glancing at her folder and wishing she could see what was inside it.

"The file says you're unmarried," Rosso said, as if reading her thoughts. "Any men friends?"

"Not after two years in prison. The old ones are gone and I haven't met anyone new. Except you and Mr. Irving."

He chuckled. "Adam isn't exactly a ladies' man."

"I thought he seemed quite friendly toward that woman Clair."

"Friendly and intimate are two different things."

Karen stood up abruptly and started fussing around. "I wish I had something to feed you. I only had a sandwich for dinner myself."

"Don't worry about it. I have to be going anyway." He finished the beer and stood up.

She picked the file off the coffee table to hand it to him and somehow the contents slipped. "Oh God, I'm sorry!" She bent to pick up the file papers and saw a photograph of herself. Of course it was no surprise that the parole officer's file should contain photos of his clients, but it was not a mug shot or prison picture. It was a street scene, a photo of her as she emerged through the gate of the prison a month earlier.

"What—? I didn't realize I was having my picture taken or I'd have smiled."

Rosso seemed a bit embarrassed. "I like to see what my people look like. It helps to know them."

"Did you take this?"

"Someone took it for me."

She made a wild guess. "Clair Gleason is one of your cases too, isn't she?"

"What makes you think that?"

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"She said she knew you," Karen lied.

"Well, I have a great many clients. With so many people in prison, so many being paroled each month, we carry a heavy caseload."

"Did you send Clair to Irving too?"

"I might have." He smiled at her. "Is it that important?"

"How many women does he employ?"

"I have no idea," Tom Rosso answered, still smiling. "What does it matter?"

"Are they all ex-convicts like me?"

Rosso slipped an arm around her waist. "Believe me, they're not like you!"

She twisted free of his grasp. "I don't want to go back to prison, Mr. Rosso."

"And you won't! I can guarantee that."

Karen's arms hung weakly at her side. "What should I do?"

"Leave it to me. I'll speak with Irving."

She continued to go to Adam Irving's office each day. There was another survey to be conducted and another meeting with the drugstore manager was coming up. "I won't use you for a second 'accident' while this one is pending," Irving told her. "They might check up and catch it. They might even have someone watching you." He grinned. "Lawyers can be devious types."

"Did Mr. Rosso speak to you about me?"

"There's nothing to worry about. You won't be in any danger. Right now I'm more worried about Clair. She hasn't been around all week."

The store manager offered Karen three thousand dollars and Irving decided she should accept it. "That's not bad for a first effort. If we hold out for more it just might attract suspicion."

She collected the check on schedule and brought it to Irving's office. The secretary told her he'd been called away on important business and she should come to his apartment that evening. Feeling just a bit apprehensive, Karen arrived at the address about seven-thirty. It was a fancy condominium overlooking the park, but that didn't surprise her. Despite his small law office, Irving was obviously quite successful.

"Come in, Karen," he told her, opening the door and quickly going back to the telephone. He spoke for another moment while she waited patiently, then hung up and said, "Tom Rosso's on his way over. We have a problem. Did you bring the check?"

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"Here it is." She handed it over.

"Good." He glanced at the back and then handed it over to her. "Endorse it and then I'll give you your share. We may not be able to do any more business right away."

"Why not?" she asked, but before he could answer the doorman buzzed to announce that Tom Rosso was on his way up. Irving walked to the door to admit him while Karen endorsed the check.

Her parole officer came in quickly, glanced toward Karen with a little nod, and turned his attention to Irving. "Now what's the trouble?"

"The cops have gotten to Clair. One of the other girls phoned to warn me. I've been busy calling everyone. We've got to lay low for a while."

Rosso grunted and thought about it. "Do you think she'll talk?"

Adam Irving shrugged. "We have to consider the possibility. I want my share of what's in the safe-deposit box. I think a nice vacation out of the country is called for."

Rosso glanced at Karen. "What about her?"

Irving turned toward her. "You'll keep your mouth shut, won't you, Karen?"

"I—I—"

"And what about you, for that matter?" Rosso asked. "If Clair implicates you, the D.A. could squeeze the whole thing out of you."

"Like hell he could! Just give me my share and we'll call it quits."

Tom Rosso smiled. "Sure, Adam." He held up his hand and went into his act. "Now you see it—" A silver dollar appeared. "—and now you don't." It disappeared with a flick of the wrist.

"Cut the clowning, Tom."

"Now you see it—" A tiny automatic pistol slipped out of his sleeve. "—and now you don't."

He shot Adam Irving through the left eye.

Karen was in hysterics. "Oh God, Tom, you've killed him!"

Rosso bent over the body and then straightened up. "Don't worry. The shot wasn't loud enough for anyone to hear."

"I don't want to go back to prison!" she cried. "I'll die if I have to go back there!"

"Don't worry, you're not going back. I already told you that, didn't I?"

"But he's dead!"

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"We'll be out of the country before they ever find his body. You'll stay with me tonight and in the morning I'll clean out that safe-deposit box on the way to the airport."

He had to hold her and finally give her a shot of Irving's whiskey to calm her down. Finally he spread a blanket over the body, at Karen's insistence, and they left the apartment together.

"What about the rest of the girls?" she asked.

"They're on their own. I'm only worried about you."

It was just getting dark as they drove across town to his apartment in a middle-class area. Karen half-expected a wife to be waiting at the door, but it was immediately obvious that he lived alone. The story of the divorce must have been true. She curled up on the sofa while he phoned the airline and charged two tickets to London on his credit card. "We'll stay in London under assumed names while I book us a flight to somewhere else. I'll pay cash for those tickets and our trail will end there."

"I have no passport," she told him.

"I keep a couple of extras for an emergency. You fit the description on one of them, and I can take a Polaroid photo of you tonight. I'll laminate it to the page with a fake seal and it should get you through."

"You seem very experienced at this."

"I've thought out all the possibilities. I'm going to pack now so we can leave first thing in the morning. What about your clothes?"

She looked blank. "I don't know. I don't have much."

"We'll leave them," he decided. "I'll buy you a whole new wardrobe in London. It might be dangerous going back to your place."

She agreed with that. "Irving's secretary knew I was going there tonight. If they find the body they'll come looking for me."

He packed a single suitcase and emptied his attaché case in preparation for the morning. Then he took her picture and worked on the passport till it was almost perfect. "I think we're all set. Want a drink before we turn in?"

"Do you have a beer? I might go for one of those."

They sat for another hour as he described the operation. "I relied entirely on female parolees, especially ones who looked nice and innocent like you. At one point we had sixteen women working, faking supermarket injuries and auto accidents. We wouldn't use anyone too much, and we constantly changed girls as others became available. Right now I think we have ten. Irving kept the files on

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everything. He had an account for expenses and the rest of the profits are in the safe-deposit box."

"How much?"

"Over a quarter-million. We've been at it a few years."

Karen shifted uneasily on the sofa. "Did you have to kill him?"

"I never quite trusted Adam. The whole thing was my idea, but a couple of times I caught him trying to skim off some extra money for himself. There was no way I was going to split that cash with him." He smiled at her. "I'd rather spend it on you."

After a time he asked, "Are you coming to bed?"

She shuddered and said, "Don't—don't ask me to sleep with you tonight. I just saw you kill a man. Maybe in London, but not tonight."

"Suit yourself. You can take the sofa. It's fairly comfortable."

"Tom—"

"Yes?"

"You'd better pack that gun in the suitcase you check through. If you carry it on the metal detector will catch it."

"Good thinking!"

He brought her a blanket and she wrapped herself in it. "What time do we have to get up in the morning?"

"Around seven, I think. The flight is at noon. I want to be at the bank when it opens."

He went into the bedroom and she turned out the light. "I hope my snoring doesn't keep you awake."

"I'm used to it, after two years in a prison dorm."

"One other thing—if the phone rings, don't answer it."

They were at the bank by ten o'clock. Karen waited on a couch in the safe-deposit department while Rosso took the box into one of the booths and emptied it into his attaché case. Back in the car he opened it and showed her the packets of hundred-dollar bills.

"I'll carry this on," he said. "The x-ray machine won't show anything suspicious."

"I'll feel a lot better when we're over the ocean."

There'd been nothing on the morning news about finding Adam Irving's body. As he drove to the airport Rosso squeezed her hand and told her everything would be fine. He left the car in the long-term lot and checked his suitcase through to London. Karen walked with him toward the x-ray and metal detector.

"Did my snoring annoy you?"

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She shook her head. "I could barely hear it. Anyway, I was glad to know you could sleep so soundly. I was awake a lot."

"You don't think about it, that's all. That's the secret. You just don't think about it." He placed the attaché case on the belt moving through the x-ray machine and walked through the airport metal detector with Karen following him. Then he picked the case off the conveyor and they continued toward the gate.

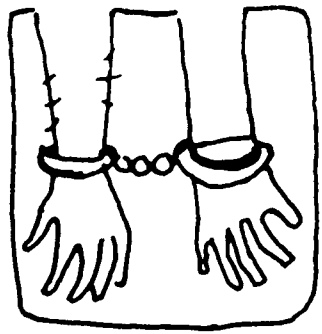
"How long is it to London?" she asked.

"Close to seven hours, and with the time difference it'll be quite late when we land. Almost midnight, I think."

Karen saw the men moving in from either side in response to her midnight phone call. She took a firm grip on his wrist above the handle of the attaché case and spoke quite distinctly. She wanted him to hear the bad news from her.

"Tom Rosso, I am Sergeant Karen Holden of the police undercover squad. I'm arresting you on charges of murder, conspiracy, and insurance fraud. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

She had always wanted to be an actress.



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Author of last year's off-beat and hilarious mystery Jersey Monkey *(St. Martin's Press) and several other novels published by Little, Brown & Company, Kate Gallison hails from New Jersey, where she is currently at work on a new novel. The following story is her first for* EQMM, *and also her debut with the short story form. . . .*

ARS LONGA, VITA BREVIS

by KATE GALLISON

Jane Smith found herself as a creative artist at the age of fifty-seven, after her children were grown and gone and her husband had run off to the Bahamas with one of those trophy bimboes one hears about. When Jane's course in painting and drawing at the county community college was over she took to the garage and began to make art. Important art, too, significant art, not your pallid landscapes or bourgeois arrangements of peonies, but powerfully moving expressions of the perceptions of a resonant soul.

Nobody bought her work.

Jane exhibited locally, of course, and even got into a couple of juried shows, but her paintings looked completely out of place among the big-eyed children and the bowls of fruit. It couldn't have been the work; it was passionate, eloquent, moving. It must be the audience, or the milieu. She had slides made and took them to New York City.

The New York art world was unmoved.

She knew it wasn't her painting. It was honest, riveting, and compelling, possibly the most significant American work of the late twentieth century. It must be something else. As she confronted her image in the hotel mirror that night, dumpy, frumpy, middle-aged, and inescapably suburban, she suddenly knew: it was herself.

The lack of sexiness was in her public image. She had no personal style.

What was required was a makeover. For a clever woman with a little money all things were possible. She went into the bathroom

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and stripped off her clothes, the plaid skirt and cashmere twin set, the sensible shoes, the utilitarian underwear. She wrapped a towel around her head, hiding her gray hair. What did a successful artist look like? Could this clay be molded to resemble one? Liposuction, a tummy tuck, maybe a face lift. But, no, it wasn't the wrinkles. Louise Nevelson had wrinkles, for Pete's sake. Georgia O'Keeffe had wrinkles. Of course, Jane would look better without the wrinkles, but surgery was so time-consuming and painful.

Maybe a bouffant aubergine wig.

And the clothes. What did successful big-city artists wear nowadays? Big gold hoop earrings? Long droopy caftans? Leather miniskirts?

She made a few sketches on the hotel stationery, pictures of the new Jane Smith: taller, slimmer, younger, hipper. She tried a variety of artistic outfits, turbans, caftans, hot pants. A feeling of sadness came over her, and she put down the pencil.

She did not want to give up the clothes she had worn since Vassar, the clothes that allowed her to pass almost unseen through places like the country-club dining room. She hated big jewelry. Her garments felt comfortable. Her body felt comfortable. All she wanted was to sell her paintings.

There was a knock on the door. Jane threw on her plaid flannel bathrobe. She hadn't ordered anything. Through the peephole she saw a tall, dark young woman, wearing twelve pounds of face makeup and not a whole lot else. Big gold hoops dangled from her earlobes, and her legs would have come all the way up to Jane's chin, even without the platform shoes. The woman looked . . . she looked like a passionate young artist.

"Yes? What is it?" Jane called through the door.

The woman said, "Smith?"

Jane opened the door. A cloud of patchouli rolled over her.

"You John Smith? Or do I have the wrong room?" the woman said.

"I take it you have a business appointment with Mr. Smith," said Jane.

"You might say that."

"Forget John Smith." She pulled her inside and shut the door. "My dear, how would you like to abandon this sordid and dangerous line of work and take up a career in art?"

Jane's new alter ego was a tremendous success.

First of all Jane took her to a famous salon and had them dye her hair aubergine. Then she told her she would be called Vita Brevis,

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because Jane Smith was simply too frumpy a name to sell art under. Then she bought her some clothes and costume jewelry, letting her pick out her own—after all, it was the girl's sense of personal style that Jane wanted her for—and took her around to all the galleries where Jane had been ignored the week before.

The gallery owners fell on her neck. Jane claimed to be her agent. They rented a loft, and Vita moved in and pretended to paint. Meanwhile Jane went home to the suburbs, collected her unsold paintings, and removed her signature, replacing it with the initials V. B.

The *New York Times* called Brevis's work "passionate, eloquent, moving." *Art News* said "honest, riveting, and compelling, possibly the most significant American work of the late twentieth century." The paintings began to command huge prices. Gallery owners got half, of course, and Jane had to split what was left with Vita, but even so there was enough to keep them both very comfortably in their separate expensive lifestyles, even with Vita's drug habit. From time to time Jane would pick up a copy of *W* or *Mirabella* and see pictures of Vita cavorting with film stars at late-night clubs. She always looked stunning, if depraved.

Then one day Jane called at the loft in SoHo to get Vita's signature on another contract. Vita's floor-through was at the top of three long flights of stairs, and Jane made the trip as seldom as possible, not only because the climb bothered her knees and made her heart pound, but also because she hated to see Vita up close leading the Bohemian life. She usually found Vita high on some drug or other, keeping company with sneaky-looking men in ponytails. Today, however, the smell that greeted Jane when the door was opened was not of marijuana, nor yet of patchouli or sweaty young men. It was the odor of linseed oil and turpentine.

There among the accouterments of Vita's expensive Bohemian life was an easel bearing a brand-new canvas, gigantic in size, smeared with the sort of colors Jane herself used, only wilder, more flamboyant, cruder. Almost a parody of Jane's work. In the lower right-hand corner were the initials V. B.

Vita had started painting.

"How do you like it?" said Vita.

"I think it's an obscene pastiche."

"We can get big bucks for it, Jane. Roger Geldt at the Mumford Gallery has been after me to give him something bigger."

"I won't hear of it. You'll ruin my artistic reputation."

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"I don't need you, you know," said Vita. "You're nothing without me. You're only my agent, nothing but a bloodsucking leech; there's plenty more where you came from, and cheaper, too; and as for these cheesy paintings, I can do them in my sleep."

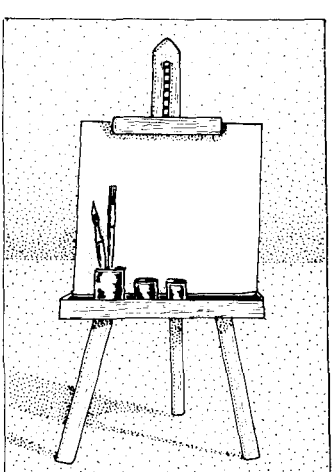
"You ignorant tart! If it weren't for me you'd still be turning tricks in cheap midtown hotels!"

"Your mother," Vita snarled.

They found poor Vita's body lying in front of her last painting, bludgeoned to death with a mallet. Some wandering junkie had done it, no doubt. New York was full of them.

The *haute monde* of two continents came to the funeral, actors, artists, millionaire socialites, and nobody paid the slightest attention to Jane. Not that she minded. The rich and famous weren't very interesting to her anyway.

No, what she minded was the fuss that was made over Vita Brevis's last painting. The *New York Times* said "breathtaking." *Art News* said "a powerfully moving expression of the perceptions of a resonant soul." You can see it for yourself if you want to; it's hanging on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art, the first thing you come to as you get off the elevator. As for Jane, she is painting still, working in her same old garage, but her paintings go largely unsold. "A pale imitation," said the *Times* critic, "of the work of Vita Brevis."



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a *NEW* short story by

STANLEY COHEN

Twenty-two years after the publication of his Edgar-nominated novel Taking Gary Feldman, *Connecticut author Stanley Cohen recently received word that the book is to be made into a motion picture. Congratulations to Mr. Cohen on this good news, and on producing this entertaining new piece for* EQMM. . . .

A BITE OF LUNCH

by STANLEY COHEN

He took the long hike out to the road and slid her Sunday *Times* from the mailbox. Heavier than usual. An easy eight-pounder. Maybe ten. He returned to the house, and before walking back up the steps to dump it in her lap, he paused in the mud room, pulled out the Book Review section, and opened it to the Best Seller List.

And there it was, as usual. *A Tidy Little Murder,* by Rosemary Frantz. Down a notch or two, but still on the list after twenty-seven weeks. Over half a year. She'll probably complain because of the two-notch drop.

Then he pulled out the Arts and Leisure section and opened to the theater directory. And there *it* was, as well. *Murder,* at the Broadhurst Theater, still selling tickets to eight shows a week.

He folded both sections neatly back together and slid them into the paper where they belonged, and as he started up the steps, he reminded himself to be nice. The plan was beginning to jell in his mind and he didn't want to do anything that might put her on guard. He entered the spacious library where she sat at her typewriter, and put the paper on the long table, next to where her work was laid out. "Your *Times,* sweetheart," he said.

"Thank you, dear," she answered without looking up.

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"For somebody up there in the big time, it seems to me you could take Sundays off," he said, feigning great consideration for her.

"I don't plan to work long. I had a germ of an idea for a simply smashing ending for my new play, and I wanted to get something on paper before it got away. Why don't you start fixing breakfast?" Then she looked up at him for the first time, and her expression changed. "Did you go out to the mailbox like that?"

"What? I'm comfortable." He felt like a child about to be scolded. He brushed his hands down the fronts of his old work pants. "These are clean. A couple of stains, maybe, but they're clean."

"What about the rest of you? Couldn't you have put on a shirt? Did you have to walk out to the road in your undershirt? Ralph, can't you adjust to not living on McKenzie Street? We don't have to live that way anymore. This is not McKenzie Street, and you're no longer a plumber. Can't you adapt to that fact?"

"Nobody saw me. Nobody even drove by while I was out there."

"But what if somebody had?"

He rubbed his hands over his naked shoulders, which were densely covered with black hair. "Gimme a break. It's gonna be a scorcher today." Then he scratched at the paunch that stretched the knitted ribs of his undershirt. He'd once been like a rock, but since she'd become a big rich celebrity, he didn't do much of anything but eat. He didn't have to do anything else.

"Please, Ralph, I wish you wouldn't go out to the road dressed like that. Really. Besides, it's not hot. The entire house is air-conditioned."

He suppressed the urge to respond. "You take your shot this morning?"

She eyed him curiously. "Why would you ask that, all of a sudden? You know very well that I did. Diabetics don't forget to take their insulin, ever." Then, "Now that you mention it, I need you to go to the drugstore and pick up my next supply. They have it ready. That and my other medicine."

"I thought I remembered you were running low. That's why I was asking," he lied. Bringing it up was stupid. Stupid! He had to learn to keep his mouth shut and not bring the business to her attention. She picked up on things. A mind like a steel trap. That's why they liked her writing. Especially her play. He couldn't get over the day he saw all those people standing in line to pay forty dollars to see that first play of hers. Forty bucks! Just to see a two-hour play she wrote.

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"Why don't you fix breakfast?" she said, rather impatiently. "I think you need something to do. And put on a shirt. People on Canterbury Drive don't have their meals in their underwear."

He felt like taking a swing at her, but that wouldn't help along the plan. Nothing to do but cool it. "What would you like?" he asked. "I'll go fix it."

"The usual. Juice, tea, toast."

"You want some eggs? How about some eggs?"

"Do you think you can get them right for a change? I realize it isn't easy for a plumber to poach eggs."

"I'll give it my best shot. Okay? That's all I can do."

She smiled that phony smile at him. "I'm sure they'll be fine. Call me when everything is ready."

He hated that smile. She could look down at him while she was looking up at him. He went into the large kitchen and put the kettle on to heat. Sure he liked having money. Who wouldn't? He only wished he could have it without her. And maybe that was just going to be possible. Just maybe. If he used his head.

He set the table, doing it exactly as she always insisted it be done. Then he put the pot of water on the stove for her eggs. He liked his own eggs scrambled. She'd liked them too until her books started selling.

Plumber. What's wrong with plumbers? Let's see the world get along without them. Besides, he hadn't been just a plumber. He'd been a plumbing contractor. There's a difference. Maybe he hadn't done all that well. The business never grew the way he had it figured. In fact, it never got to be much more than him working by himself, and old Joe helping him for a while there. But he was his own man.

He got out the oranges to squeeze her juice. Things between them hadn't been all that bad in the early days. He'd worked hard at trying to build his business up and she'd kept their little house on McKenzie Street. Then, after a couple of years of staying home, she went into substitute teaching here and there. Soon she was teaching full time. Even then, he began to sense a change in her. Just a little bit of a change, maybe, but a change, and he decided not to let it bother him. But it did. But he didn't say anything.

He looked at the glass of juice. It was too full to take that extra orange he'd cut, so he drank a little out of it. Then he squeezed in the last orange. Couple of seeds in it. The small ones that get through. Sometimes he fished them out with a spoon. This time, to hell with

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it. She'd started insisting on fresh-squeezed juice about the time she decided she was going to take up writing. Or maybe it was the time she sold that first book. *Murder Done in Style,* by Rosemary Frantz.

That's when she really started changing. It got to where he couldn't get near her anymore. In fact, he felt like a stranger around her. His business wasn't doing much of anything and she was the one making the money. And it was big money. Sometimes when she looked at him, he felt as though she were seeing him as a roach or something, only one that was too big to step on.

But she'd made no changes in their financial setup. Everything was still "joint." The big question was: how long would it stay that way? How much time did he have?

Which made him think of Dr. Barolo, whom they'd met on vacation at the resort at St. Thomas. Or rather, ex-Dr. Barolo. And "the conversation." They'd been sitting on the beach somewhere around the middle of the week they'd spent there. Rosemary hadn't shared his enthusiasm for Barolo too much, to put it mildly. "No way," would say it better. And when she got on somebody, she wasn't bashful.

"Tell me, aren't you the Dr. Edward Barolo who got all the recent newspaper publicity in New York?" she said, as if she'd been thinking about asking him for several days.

"I'm afraid so," he'd answered.

"Didn't it occur to you that you were playing God when you did what you did?" she'd asked, asking like only she could ask somebody something when she was after them.

And Barolo'd answered, "Do you understand that the man's condition was hopeless? Absolutely hopeless? He had no chance of even partial recovery. And he was in intense pain. Intense pain. Do you understand all of that? There was only one thing of interest to that unfortunate man, and that was to be free of that pain."

"Did he tell you so?"

"He didn't have to. I'm a physician."

"You *were* a physician."

"I'm still a physician. I may no longer be able to practice, and I may have had to stand trial for my decision, but I'm still a physician. I was acquitted, as I'm sure you know."

"In a court of law, yes. But not by a jury of your peers. You are no longer allowed to practice medicine."

"I feel I was dealt with unfairly. My patient needed and wanted the handling he received from me. Can't you see that? I feel it was

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the medical community that played God. With my life and career."

"I couldn't disagree more," Rosemary'd said. "You made a decision that wasn't yours to make."

"I'm not the first physician to have made such a decision and I won't be the last. I simply wasn't careful enough about keeping it from being obvious."

"I'm afraid that I have to say that I feel you got *less* than you deserved," she'd said.

He'd watched the conversation between Barolo and her with fascination. She'd have had him put away forever if she could. There was no way she was going to give him anything. And she wasn't through with him.

"Tell me, Dr. Barolo," she'd said then. "What are your plans?"

"I don't know just yet. I'd really like to appeal my case."

"Do you have other income?"

"Not really."

"If you've lost your source of income and have no plans for the future, isn't it rather extravagant of you to be spending time at a place like this, during the season?"

"I had to get away for a few days, after the trial and all the rest."

"Your lawyers must have cost you a pretty penny," she'd said.

"Yes, they did. You know New York lawyers."

"Like New York doctors, I suppose. Are you married, Dr. Barolo?"

"My wife and I are, uh, separated."

"I'm not surprised," she'd said. And that was when she got up to return to their villa. "Ralph, are you coming back now?"

"I'd kinda like to hang around down here a little longer," he'd answered, almost guessing what she would say.

"Well, please remember our plans for dinner. I would appreciate it if you'd be on time and properly dressed, as we discussed. Okay?" And she picked up her book and left them.

"Quite a lady you've got there, Ralph," Barolo'd said. He'd watched her leave with a look on his face like he'd enjoy seeing her get hit by a truck.

"Yeah. She's something, ain't she?"

"Why don't you get the hell away from her?" Barolo'd asked. "You shouldn't have to live like that."

"She's got all the money. I'm not even in business anymore."

"What business?"

"I used to be a plumbing contractor. But that's over. I couldn't go back to it."

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"Too bad."

"Too bad there's no way to have her money without her."

"That shouldn't be so tough."

He remembered looking at Barolo, who was half-serious and half-joking. It was the half-serious part that was interesting. "You say it shouldn't be so tough. Whadda you mean?"

Barolo grinned. "Ralph, look, I was only kidding. I guess I read too many mysteries."

"You may have been kidding, Doc, but there was something else there. And I'm not surprised. She ruffled your feathers pretty good, too. Am I right?"

"Ralph, don't take me seriously. I really shouldn't have said anything. I just happened to notice something."

"Tell me what it is. Come on. I'm curious."

"Forget it."

At that point he'd moved closer to Barolo and was practically leaning on him. "Tell me what it is, Doc. Come on. I want to know." He remembered Barolo staring at him for a long time without speaking. Barolo really hadn't liked what he'd gotten from Rosemary. "Come on, Doc. Tell me what you noticed."

"I don't want to be responsible for giving you any crazy ideas, Ralph."

"Relax, Doc. I'm not going to do anything stupid. Besides, what the hell do you care? It won't be no skin off your nose."

"Well, being a physician, I couldn't help noticing that she's a heart patient, on digitalis. In addition to her diabetic condition."

"So?"

"Do you know anything about digitalis, Ralph? Taken in the proper dosage, it's one of the great lifesavers we have in medicine. But in excess, it can be a deadly poison. It has to be prescribed with extremely careful limits. There is an antidote that usually works, given in time, but digitalis can be another name for dynamite. An excessive overdose and it can be goodbye, old friend. But look, I'm only telling you this out of academic interest. Understand? You won't try anything foolish, will you, Ralph?"

"Relax, Doc. My mother didn't raise no stupid sons."

He reviewed "the conversation" in his mind constantly. A day or two later he'd pumped Barolo further and gotten more details. "Just outa curiosity, Doc. And don't worry. I wouldn't dare do anything like that. But would it really be that easy?"

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"It's really that easy. What do they find? A little digitalis? Of course. It's supposed to be there. Her physician has prescribed it."

With her orange juice made and the water put up to boil, he put the bread in to toast and then faced the crisis of trying to make two poached eggs. The water in the poacher was hot. He cracked two eggs into a small bowl and one of the yolks broke, so he flushed those two down the drain. He cracked two more into the bowl, and to his pleasant surprise, got them that far at least without mishap. But when he poured them so very carefully into the poacher, once again one of the yolks gave way.

He watched in pain as the eggs began to cook in the hot water. She was right. A plumber can't poach eggs. He could dump them out and clean up the pot and start over . . . But for what? They wouldn't taste any different. So they didn't look so hot! So what? Everything else was ready. Maybe she'd give him a break and not say anything.

He called her to the table and stood by like an anxious waiter. As soon as she looked at the eggs, he knew pretty well what to expect her to say—

"You really just can't quite poach eggs, can you, dear?"

"They're gonna taste all right, what the hell."

"Food must *look* appetizing." Then she added, "And so must the person serving it. Didn't I ask you to put on a shirt? For God's sake, go get a shirt." And then she said, "Honestly, I really don't know why I keep you around. I go alone to the places my work takes me, anyway. I certainly couldn't take a man in an undershirt to a banquet at the Waldorf. Now, could I? And I still have to cook my own eggs. You can't even do that for me."

And as she walked past him into the kitchen to fix her own eggs, he knew the time had come to put the plan into action . . . As soon as she finished the play and got it all set up to go.

Yes. He'd encourage her to get that done. Definitely worth waiting for. Who knows how much more it would bring into their still joint estate? Another million, maybe? Why not two? It would be her *last* play. To be put on, what did they call it? After you've departed? Posthumously? In memorium to the queen. After all, she was the Queen of Murder. . . . And she was about to get a lesson from a beginner . . .

It was all over, finally, and all of the dust had settled, so to speak. He hadn't enjoyed doing it at all. It wasn't his "cup of tea," as she

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would have said, but once he'd taken a bunch of the little pills and powdered them with his hammer and mixed the powder into her chicken salad, a dish he never ate himself because he considered it strictly food for ladies, there was no turning back. And once the stuff began to hit her system, all the symptoms and effects showed up, just as he remembered them from Barolo's description.

When the stuff first hit her, she immediately took an extra pill herself. Then she frantically told him to call for an ambulance, which he faked for a while, to give the stuff a good hold. When he finally did call, and it arrived, she was safely beyond help.

That afternoon was probably the worst part of the whole thing. He wasn't interested in seeing her in pain. That wasn't the kind of guy he was. He just wanted her gone while the money stayed. And he'd taken care of it none too soon. Because the talk about unloading him had been coming more and more often. But the play was in and the New York hotshots she dealt with were all excited.

And their estate was still "joint." She'd just been too busy with the play to bother with him. She hardly knew he was around.

He did the funeral up right, the way he knew she'd want it to be done. The best of everything. And he was impressed with the kind of crowd she drew. Really impressed. People had come, some of them, all the way from Hollywood. That's a long way to be going to see somebody put into the ground, even if a couple of her books had been made into movies. And there were a bunch of people from New York. All of those theater hotshots, and publishing people, and editors. And a bunch of other writers. He'd even heard of one of the writers himself.

They'd had a lot of respect for her. He could tell that. However, he didn't get the feeling that they were very impressed with him. Maybe if he could tell them all about how he'd just become an independent millionaire . . . ?

They came back to the house after the funeral and stood with respect in front of the bookshelves where she lined up her work. She'd had six consecutive bestsellers over nine years. *Murder Done in Style* had been her first one, followed by *Murder with a Flourish,* and *Murder by the Dozen,* and then *The Heart of the Murder* and all the rest. And all of those copies published in paperback, and book club editions, and the ones in all of those foreign languages. Lots of books with her name on them. And then her first play. *Murder.* One-word title. And, whammo! Still selling tickets after almost a year. He even felt a touch of pride himself as he listened to all those

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people talk about her, the same way he'd felt when she'd first gotten the news about her first book being sold.

And as for how he handled things that day, at least they couldn't say he wasn't a great host. Of that he was sure. Even *she* would have been proud. A perfect gentleman, all the way.

And of course the police came. "I hope you understand, Mr. Frantz, that the law required an autopsy."

"Oh, sure, whatever you say."

"Uh, Mr. Frantz, the medical examiner said it seemed to him there was an extremely high level of digitalis present in her system."

"Well, I know she took it regularly. Under doctor's orders. And I know that when she first felt the attack coming, she took some extra. I don't really know how much more."

"Hadn't she been carefully instructed by her doctor in the use of the drug?"

"I'm sure she was. And she was a smart lady, my wife, besides. But listen, she must have panicked. Put yourself in her place and see what you come up with. You feel it comin' on, what would *you* do?"

"Mr. Frantz, the medical examiner did have one specific question. Do you happen to know *exactly* what was the last thing she ate?"

"That I know. It was chicken salad." He had long before scraped the leftovers into the toilet and then run the dish in the dishwasher.

A few days later he received a phone call. Barolo. "Oh, hello, Doc," he said. "What a surprise to hear from you after all this time. What can I do for you?"

"I read about your wife's passing. Thought I'd give you a call."

"Oh. Nice of you. Thanks. By the way, how'd you get the number? She always kept it unlisted."

"It wasn't easy, but since you ask, I was able to manage through a call to her publisher. Told them I wanted to interview you for a magazine article. I must have been convincing because they really didn't want to give it to me at first."

"I'm glad they did. So what can I do for you?" he asked again.

"Ralph, I need to talk with you." Barolo paused. "Ralph, I want to ask you for a little help."

"It'll be nice to see you," he answered quickly, but his mind was churning. This had a funny smell to it. A very funny smell. Barolo was from New York. And there was only one kind of help he could want from a retired millionaire plumber from Connecticut.

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At least he had a couple of days to get ready for Barolo's visit.

He opened the door and there stood Barolo, looking a little less prosperous than he remembered him from the islands. In fact, a lot less prosperous. "Hello, Doc. Nice to see you again."

"Some kind of scorcher today, isn't it, Ralph?" Barolo said as an opening remark.

"We're having a bit of a heat wave, Doc. No question about that. But come on in. It's air-conditioned inside here."

"Ah, nice," Barolo said as he stepped into the cool interior and looked around, sizing the place up.

"Sit down, Doc. There. That's better. Can I get you anything?"

"I could use a good drink. Could you maybe make me a drink, Ralph? A vodka tonic? Not too much vodka, plenty of tonic and ice, and a large wedge of lime if you have it. Would you mind?"

"Lemme see what I can do." He went over to the bar to fix the drink, and something about Barolo's request for a "good" drink reminded him a little of somebody asking him if he could poach eggs. He made the drink, a good drink, and brought it to Barolo.

Barolo took a couple of long satisfying swallows. Then, "Ralph, sorry to hear about Rosemary."

"Just one of those things, Doc."

"At least she left you in pretty good shape, I'd say," Barolo commented as he glanced around.

"Can't complain."

"Ralph, I'll get right to the point. I came here to ask you for a little financial aid. A loan. I need the finances necessary to appeal my case and get myself reinstated, and I've—well, my own resources are just about depleted."

"Why me, Doc?"

"I've got to turn to somebody. I seem to have run out of credit just about everywhere, Ralph. Will you help me?"

"But why me? We met on vacation for a couple of days and that was six months ago. Why'd you come to me?"

"I'm desperate, Ralph. I read about Rosemary, and knowing of her accomplishments, I figured you should be in a good position to help somebody out."

"I'm still asking, Doc. Why me? We hardly know each other."

"If what you're asking is, is this blackmail, the answer is no."

"Blackmail? Who said anything about blackmail?"

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"Ralph, I'm asking for a loan. A simple loan. I need funding to continue my fight. And that's it."

"Why did you say anything about blackmail?"

"I was afraid you might have thought that was what I was up to. Look, Ralph, your wife's death made the media, and in reading all of the various accounts, I found one that mentioned an overdose, *accidental of course, of digitalis. I don't care whether it was accidental or not.* I'm not interested in passing judgment on anybody these days, as you can imagine."

"Of course it was accidental. When the attack came, she panicked and took some extra. I'm not kidding you."

"And I'm not questioning you. So let's leave it that way. There should be no problems as long as nobody goes to the authorities and tells them how you were able to get yourself a free course in the whys and wherefores of digitalis usage. And what a good student you were, asking question after question."

"But I'm tellin' ya, it was accidental. Hey, I'd never do anything like that. She blew her cool when the attack came, and took a pill or two too many."

"Ralph, I met Rosemary. Remember? Rosemary was a smart lady. A very smart lady. She'd have known better than to kill herself that way. It takes a lot more of a dose than she'd have been willing to give herself to go out the way she went. I'm a physician. Remember? And I was there when you got your instruction on the subject. But let's forget all that. I'm not pointing any fingers at anybody. Even though it was obvious you might have been strongly motivated. I'm here plain and simple to ask for some help to get back on my feet."

"Well, . . . maybe I could help you out a little. What'd you have in mind?" He watched the look on Barolo's face ease quickly as he said it.

"Thanks, Ralph. I was hoping you'd come through for me. I need enough money to get by for a few months and to cover my attorney's fees. I've got to get myself reinstated and get my practice reestablished. Which I'm sure I can do. And then I'll pay you back. Everything I borrow."

"What kinda money are we talking?"

"I'm not living like I was, Ralph. Especially since my wife and I are separated. But good lawyers don't come cheap. Uh . . . do you think you could let me have about thirty thousand?"

"Think you'll need any more after that?"

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"Let's hope not. But with lawyers, you never know. At any rate, I'll pay it back. Every penny."

"Is cash all right?"

"I can manage it. In fact, it's probably better. It won't draw any attention. Sure, cash is fine."

"Okay, Doc, I'll help you out. Look, I don't keep that kind of money here at the house, but I think I can come up with about five thousand for now and I'll be in touch and arrange to give you the rest. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Ralph, I appreciate what you're doing. I can't thank you enough. And I'll pay it back."

"It's okay. Listen. I'm glad I'm in a position to be able to help."

"Uh, Ralph, could I use a bathroom to freshen up a little? The air-conditioner just went on my car and I haven't been able to get it fixed. It was a hot ride up here."

"Would you like a quick shower?"

"I do feel a little sticky. That would be pleasant, as a matter of fact."

"We've got plenty of bathrooms in this place. After that, how about a bite of lunch? I was just getting ready to eat, myself."

"Sounds good. You have a great cook, no doubt."

"It's cook's day off, today. But I can set out a pretty decent light lunch for a hot summer day. I was taught by a very fussy lady."

He led Barolo to a guest room that had a separate bath. As they walked through the house, he watched Barolo look around, obviously impressed with what he saw. Rosemary had developed pretty good taste once she had the money to pay top decorators. It wasn't much like the way they'd lived on McKenzie Street.

After leaving Barolo, he went into the library and to the safe built into the little antique piece of furniture behind Rosemary's antique desk. A little chest with fake drawers. What had she used to call the piece? A commode? He'd always thought commode was a fancy name for a toilet. He opened it and took out the envelope he'd gotten ready. Five big ones in hundreds, fifties, and twenties, not all of them new, so it would look like he'd just scraped it together out of cash on hand.

From there, he went into the kitchen to get lunch started. First, he set the table in the dining alcove that had the big windows looking out across the countryside. Barolo'd be impressed with the view. And the table setting. He set it the way Rosemary had taught him. Fancy place mats, cloth napkins in napkin rings, fancy dishes

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and silver, the whole thing. Whenever he put a napkin in one of those rings, it made him think of her, and how she'd trained him. At least he could thank her for whatever social graces he had.

He took a couple of tall, dignified pilsner glasses from a cabinet and put them on the table. Barolo'd probably be pleased to join him in having a nice cold beer with lunch. And he got out some of the fancy crackers Rosemary always bought and put them in the long, narrow cracker basket, on top of a napkin, of course, lined up like poker chips. He stood back and admired the table. Class.

He went to the refrigerator and got out a head of lettuce, and as he was carefully rinsing a couple of large leaves, Barolo came into the kitchen, looking refreshed.

Barolo walked over to the sink to see what he was doing. "Hey, Ralph," he said. "Boston lettuce. I must say I'm impressed."

"Stick around, Doc. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Would you like a cold beer?"

He got two cold beers from the refrigerator. He opened them and poured them into the tall glasses. He handed one to Barolo and took a sip from the other, carrying it with him back to the counter. Then, with Barolo watching him, he proceeded with the lunch preparations.

He placed the two freshly washed lettuce leaves on the plates. He went to the refrigerator and took out two perfect tomatoes, cut out the tops, and split each into eight uniform wedges, still attached at the bottom. He placed these on the lettuce leaves. Lovely. Rosemary would have approved.

He took out the dish of salad he'd prepared, a recipe Rosemary had taught him, a real gourmet mix, with green seedless grapes and walnuts, no less. The dish itself was a fancy little antique Rosemary had bought in England and was shaped like a chicken. He spooned the salad carefully into the tomatoes.

"Ralph, I'm really impressed," Barolo said as he watched. "You definitely know your way around the kitchen."

"Keep watching," he said. "I'm almost done and we can eat." He went back to the refrigerator and got out two hard-boiled eggs, still in shells, and jars of sweet pickles and olives. He peeled and quartered the eggs and placed them around the tomatoes. He finished garnishing the salads with the olives and gherkins.

He placed the two dishes on the table and then motioned to Barolo. "Sit over there, Doc. It's the best seat in the house for a view of the scenery."

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"Do you mind if I switch seats with you, Ralph? That one over there has a little sun on it. I'd rather not be in the sun at all."

"Sure, Doc. Sit anywhere you like. Take this one and I'll sit over there." He concentrated on not letting the smile show. The doctor wanted to switch dishes. Good for him.

Barolo made himself comfortable, took a cracker and munched it, and tasted a forkful of the salad. "This is delicious, Ralph. What is it, chicken salad?"

"A specialty of the house, taught to me by my dear departed wife. Dig in."

After they'd finished eating and made small talk for a few minutes, he apologized to Barolo that he really couldn't spend much more time at the moment because he had to get downtown to an important appointment. Barolo assured him that that was okay, since he also had to get back to New York. Then Barolo thanked him again for being willing to help him out.

He walked Barolo to the door and watched him leave, recalling as he did the moment when he handed Barolo the overstuffed envelope. It struck him that Barolo hardly looked like a fancy New York Park Avenue doctor as he folded the envelope and forced it into the pocket of his wrinkled slacks.

After seeing Barolo's car disappear out of the end of the long driveway, he returned to the kitchen, carefully scrubbed the dishes with lots of soap and hot water, and then put them in the dishwasher and turned it on. From there he went to the bathroom where Rosemary's various medications were located.

First, he took the vial containing something called dilantin, and wiped off its top with alcohol. He plunged a fresh syringe into it, filled the syringe, and pushed it into his arm. Then he reached for the ipecac and choked down the prescribed amount. Even with these double precautions, it was going to be an unpleasant afternoon for a while, but it had to be done. Besides, he hated giving up the chicken salad. It hadn't been all that bad. In fact, not bad at all. Maybe he'd even make it again some time.

Once he'd made it through the afternoon, there would be nothing else to do but wait for the tube, or the radio, or one of the newspapers to deliver him a small news clip about the unfortunate demise of some ex-doctor, on the parkway to New York. Cardiac arrest, or some such thing. Maybe they'd even report that he was found with a cool five big ones in small bills stuffed in his pocket. A small price to pay, considering. After all, blackmail is forever. ●

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a *NEW* short story by

JON L. BREEN

Fans of sports mysteries, and horse racing in particular, are no doubt familiar with Jon Breen's racetrack public-address announcer sleuth, Jerry Brogan. In this outing, the fate of a jockey accused of murdering a racehorse owner lies with Jerry—and a would-be Perry Mason . . .

THE DEFENSE CALLS JERRY BROGAN

by JON L. BREEN

Donald Goossen seemed remarkably calm for a man about to go on trial for murder. His friend Jerry Brogan, regarding him over a mountainous brunch at a Surfside restaurant, found that somewhat alarming. He was glad Don hadn't sunk into a mire of unproductive depression, but on the other hand, he hoped the ex-jockey understood the enormity of what he was about to get into. As the old Kipling burlesque went, "If you can keep your head while those about you are losing theirs, you just don't understand the situation."

"Who's representing you in court?" Jerry inquired. "Bill Fosdick?"

Don shook his head. "Bill doesn't do criminal work, but he referred me to one of the best trial lawyers in the country. George Freeman."

Jerry nearly gagged on his blueberry muffin. "No, Don, not Freeman. You have to get somebody else."

Don looked puzzled. "You know him?"

"I met him once. At my Aunt Olivia's house. She was hosting some mystery-fiction club she belongs to, and Freeman was there."

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"Well, what's wrong with him? Bill Fosdick said he had complete confidence in him."

"The guy's nuts. He collects old detective novels, fills his house with them. All of his conversation has to do with locked rooms, clues, and poisons unknown to science."

Don shrugged and sipped his champagne. "So he has a hobby. That doesn't mean he isn't a great lawyer."

Jerry popped his last oyster and leaned across the table. "I tell you, it's more than a hobby. Want to hear the clincher? He says he was first inspired to a law career by watching Raymond Burr play Perry Mason on TV in the fifties."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"The heck it doesn't. Look, I know these mystery buffs. My aunt is one of them. They don't live in the real world. You don't want somebody defending you who's going to get in court and start citing precedents from Erle Stanley Gardner novels, do you?"

"Jerry, he wouldn't have got where he is if he wasn't good."

"Look, Don, when I met him I asked him, just being funny, if he'd ever confronted the real murderer in the courtroom during a trial. First he laughed and said of course not. But then he got this dreamy look in his eye and said someday he'd like to, though. I'm sure for most criminal cases, Freeman is just as good a lawyer as Bill Fosdick says he is. In the ordinary sordid, boring, depressing, real-life murder case, everybody knows who did it and the mystery-story mentality doesn't have a chance to take over. But this whole Michael Diaz murder is just too much like one of those novels Freeman loves. It's liable to send him over the edge, I tell you."

Don Goossen shook his head. "I'll rely on Bill Fosdick's judgment. If he says Freeman is okay, he's okay. And if the Michael Diaz murder is so much like one of the books Freeman reads, maybe it'll help to have a lawyer with a detective-story mentality. Did you ever think of that?"

"That only works until the story veers off into messy reality," Jerry said. Realizing he'd belabored the subject and he wasn't about to change Don's mind, Jerry allowed the subject to drift to which of them would pick up the brunch check.

Jerry was sure Don Goossen hadn't killed Diaz, sure to the point that he'd called in some old markers to help raise Goossen's hefty bail, but the fact that the circumstances of Diaz's death superficially carried the trappings of an old-fashioned closed-circle whodunit made him think the choice of George Freeman potentially disas-

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trous. Any mystery fan would be on cloud nine with the circumstances.

Since Jerry had been one of the people at Diaz's house the night of the murder, he had half expected to be called as a prosecution witness and had known he would be a defense witness. Thus, he was barred from attending sessions of the trial, could only read in the newspapers what a damning circumstantial case the D.A. had built against Don Goossen. As it happened, the prosecution did not choose to call him, so he entered the courtroom for the first time as a defense witness in the second week of the trial.

After taking the oath and settling his 250-pound bulk into the witness chair, Jerry watched George Freeman walking toward him. They had discussed his testimony, of course, and Jerry gathered his principal role was as a character witness for Don Goossen.

"Mr. Brogan, will you tell us your occupation, please?" Freeman asked.

"*I'm the public-address announcer at Surfside Meadows race*track."

"How long have you held that position?"

"Ten years."

"And how many horse races would you say you've called in that time?"

"Somewhere between forty-five hundred and five thousand."

"Are you acquainted with the defendant, Donald Goossen?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known Mr. Goossen?"

"Since he began riding at Surfside Meadows in nineteen eighty-eight."

"How would you characterize your relationship?"

"We're friends. We've seen each other socially. I've been to his house, he's been to mine. We've helped each other out on occasion. We have numerous interests and, ah, concerns in common."

"What concerns do you mean?"

"We've discussed diets a lot. Don Goossen had a weight problem when he was riding." Jerry half expected the famous titter to run through the crowded court as everyone focused on his own bulky frame, but a decorous silence prevailed.

"You saw many of Mr. Goossen's performances as a jockey?"

"Quite a few. By the time he got to Surfside, though, he wasn't getting many rides because of his weight. He was riding at a hun-

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dred and twenty. Too heavy to get more than a few mounts a week."

"How would you characterize Mr. Goossen's abilities as a jockey?"

The assistant D.A., a striking fortyish black woman named Carol Booth, rose from her seat. "Your Honor, I wonder what relevance that question might have."

Judge Carbajal, a jurist who appeared younger than either of the adversaries but who had already mastered the requisite air of boredom, said, "Will you tell us, Mr. Freeman?"

"Your Honor, my client's character as an athletic competitor in life-and-death situations may be at least suggestive of his character as an alleged murderer."

"I'm not sure—" the prosecutor began, but seemed to reconsider. "Oh, all right, I'll withdraw my objection," she said indulgently.

The court reporter repeated the question, while Jerry wondered what good the interruption had done either side.

"Don was an excellent rider. He regularly had major mounts in stakes races even when he was too heavy to ride more than a few times a week. He seemed to have a special rapport with horses. He rarely made a mistake in judgment. He did not use his whip excessively, preferring to hand ride whenever he could."

"Would you describe him as a reckless rider?"

Jerry shook his head firmly. "No. He was very clean and cautious. He never took unnecessary risks."

Freeman paused to let that sink in. The prosecution's scenario depended on a very risk-taking murderer. Jerry was sure the jury were getting the point.

"And how would you describe Don Goossen's character off the racetrack?"

"As more of the same. A cautious, considerate person. Studies his options carefully. No gambler."

The prosecutor appeared to be squirming in her seat. Probably for the jury's benefit, but Jerry sensed she was aching to get at him.

"Mr. Brogan, where were you the evening of November nineteenth of last year?" It was a standard mystery-story line, and Freeman gave it a special flourish, rekindling Jerry's doubts about the lawyer's suitability to this case.

"I was invited to a dinner party at the home of Michael Diaz."

Most of what Jerry remembered of the dinner party he was not asked about. Undoubtedly the basic facts had been well established by prosecution witnesses. Diaz was an owner/breeder who had burst into prominence in the last decade after making a fortune with a

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string of auto-supply stores. On the night of his death, there had been three people at the Diaz house for dinner aside from Jerry, Don, and Diaz himself: Victor Hamblen, the trainer of Diaz's west-coast string; Gloria Diaz, the host's blond, patrician wife; and their stunning daughter Stacey, who combined the best physical characteristics a mixture of Nordic and Latin blood could provide.

The evening had not been an altogether happy one even before its violent ending. Jerry's own enjoyment of the gathering had been reduced when he had to attend stag, his longtime girlfriend Donna Melendez having dropped out at the last moment because of a professional emergency of the kind to which doctors, police, clergy, and high-school drama teachers were especially susceptible. The host was not at his best, complaining of pain from a toothache. And there was enough tension and intrigue swirling around the table to keep anyone else's mood from being too jolly.

Don had been there for two reasons: to discuss a proposed mating of a Diaz mare with a stallion owned by his current employers and to further the chances of his own mating with the Diaz daughter. Diaz wanted the breeding contract to specify a lower price if the offspring turned out to be a filly rather than a colt, with an ultrasound test on the mare to determine the sex prior to the foaling. His daughter raised feminist objections, but Diaz insisted it was a business matter and not one of gender discrimination, and anyway what could be stupider than to apply human sexual politics to livestock?

His wife meanwhile was expressing strong objections to Diaz's plans to return Flame Thrower, a nine-year-old stallion who had proven infertile at stud, to training after three years in retirement.

Diaz had raised polite but pointed objections to any match between Don Goossen and his daughter and seemed to be using that as an excuse for not entering into the breeding contract. Their distaste for Don Goossen as a potential son-in-law seemed to be one of the few things Mr. and Mrs. Diaz still had in common.

Victor Hamblen was shaken that his assistant trainer had been fired and that he might well be next if certain Diaz horses did not start doing better. He shared Gloria Diaz's reservations about returning Flame Thrower to training, though he expressed them far less pointedly, seeming to Jerry considerably cowed by his employer.

Jerry had noted at the time the symmetry of the situation: it seemed everyone present at the dinner had some serious grievance against the host except himself.

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"Mr. Brogan," George Freeman asked him, "were you among the persons at the table when Michael Diaz became ill?"

"Yes."

"Where were you seated in relation to Mr. Diaz?"

"Diaz was at the head of the table. Don Goossen was to his immediate left. I was next to Don. Mrs. Diaz was at my left, at the end of the table facing Diaz. Victor Hamblen was across from me, at Mrs. Diaz's left, and Stacey Diaz was across from Don and to her father's right."

"That's a bit more than I asked for, Mr. Brogan, but thank you for refreshing our collective memory." There was something odd in Freeman's manner now. He seemed keyed up and on edge, like a circus performer about to attempt a difficult maneuver.

"In the moments leading up to Mr. Diaz's illness, were you aware of the bowl of salsa on the table to the left of Mr. Goossen's water glass?"

"I knew it was there, sure. I wasn't fixated on it."

"Naturally not. Had you had some salsa earlier in the evening?"

"Yes."

"A considerable amount?"

"I'd say so, yes. I enjoy salsa, and this was a very good one."

"And had others eaten it?"

"Sure. I believe Mrs. Diaz passed it by. I remember she said it was too hot and spicy for her. And Mr. Hamblen I recall passed on grounds of concern about his ulcer. I know Don Goossen had some, though, and Stacey Diaz did. And, of course, Michael Diaz."

"Did you suffer any illness during or after the dinner?"

"Well, the death of my host didn't exactly help my digestion any, but no, I can't say that I did."

"So you would agree that at the time you sampled the salsa it had not been poisoned?"

"Objection," said Carol Booth. "Calls for a conclusion of the witness."

George Freeman shrugged. He seemed amused, and Jerry could see why. Freeman's line of questioning must have been very similar to what Booth had taken with earlier prosecution witnesses, and certainly nothing Freeman had asked Jerry about the dinner party seemed likely to do his client the least good.

"Objection sustained," the judge said wearily.

"To your knowledge, Mr. Brogan, did anyone else at the party evince symptoms of illness?"

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"Not to my knowledge, no."

"Mr. Brogan, do you recall Mr. Goossen passing the salsa to Mr. Diaz for the last time?" Jerry knew the significance of the question very well: Diaz had died as a result of a massive dose of cyanide, traces of which were subsequently found in the remaining salsa.

"Yes, I do."

"And this was a few moments before he was stricken?"

"Yes, it was." And why do I still feel like a prosecution witness, Jerry wondered. They were venturing into an area not covered in the rehearsal, and he couldn't imagine where Freeman thought he was going.

"Do you recall who was the last person at the table to take some of the salsa before it was passed to Mr. Diaz?"

"I believe it was me."

"Between that time and the passing of the salsa to Mr. Diaz, did you observe anything in regard to the salsa?"

"No!" Jerry said decisively. Certainly not Don Goossen's sleight-of-hand pass over the bowl that both Victor Hamblen and Gloria Diaz had claimed to have seen in their prosecution testimony.

"Mr. Brogan, during the period in question, which of the diners would have been able to reach the salsa easily from where they were sitting, without calling attention to themselves?"

"I don't know that anyone could."

"But surely Stacey Diaz or Victor Hamblen, for example, would not be able to reach that far across the table without being noticed?"

"No, it would be quite a boardinghouse reach," Jerry agreed. He thought, but didn't say, that if Stacey had attempted such a maneuver in the very low-cut dress she'd been wearing, he could not have failed to notice it.

"And the same would be even more pronounced if attempted by Mr. Hamblen or Mrs. Diaz?"

"That is correct."

"And I gather decorous table manners were being observed that evening and such a departure would have been noticed by all present?"

"I suppose it would, yes," Jerry said. And why, counselor, are you expending so much effort strengthening the prosecution's case? These seemed like leading questions—Jerry had seen Perry Mason a few times, too—but apparently Carol Booth saw no reason to object. Maybe she figured as long as Freeman was trying her case for her, why not just let him have at it?

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"Now that bowl of salsa, Mr. Brogan, has been described as standing to the left of Mr. Goossen's water glass?"

"That is accurate."

"But is it not accurate to say it was just as close to your place-setting as to Mr. Goossen's?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So in fact, you were in as good a position to introduce some foreign matter into the salsa bowl as was Mr. Goossen?"

"Yes, I suppose I was." Jerry wasn't too offended by the implication. At least Freeman was finally introducing something to help his client.

"And as a matter of fact, since you were the last person to partake of the salsa before it was passed to Michael Diaz, one might observe that your opportunity was even *better* than Don Goossen's, might one not?"

"Now that you mention it," Jerry said with a smile, "you're right about that."

"Mr. Brogan, how well did you know the deceased, Michael Diaz?"

"Quite well. He had asked me for advice when he first started to get into the racing business. I gave him some help, introduced him to people."

"Did you in fact introduce him to Don Goossen?"

"Yes, I did." And thus got Don into his present trouble, at least indirectly. Oh well.

"And how well do you know Gloria Diaz?"

"Not as well. I'd met her briefly on a few occasions before that dinner."

"Mr. Brogan, did you have an affair with Gloria Diaz?"

The suggestion was so off the wall that Jerry couldn't gather his wits to answer for a moment. And before he did, Freeman added, "And had Michael Diaz found out about it? And is that what led you to poison the salsa?"

Carol Booth, seemingly as stunned by the line of questioning as Jerry, was finally on her feet. "Your Honor, counsel is impeaching his own witness and introducing matter for which no proper foundation has been laid."

George Freeman was looking at Jerry, a totally unjustified look of victory in his eyes. "Your Honor, I believe there is such foundation, and I would ask, under the circumstances, that Mr. Brogan from this point onward be regarded as a hostile witness."

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"Mr. Brogan has evinced no signs of hostility, Your Honor," Carol Booth said. "All the hostility I can see has been directed at the witness by counsel for the defense. I most strenuously reiterate my objection to this whole line of questioning."

"If counsel are through posturing," Judge Carbajal said languidly, "perhaps the bench could get a word in." Looking at him, Jerry marveled that even this kind of fireworks seemed to bore the blasé jurist. "I believe since the question has been asked, Mr. Brogan should have the opportunity to respond for the record. Will the stenographer please read back the question?"

"I believe there were several," the D.A. said acidly.

"The question about the affair," Judge Carbajal prompted.

"Mr. Brogan, did you have an affair with Gloria Diaz?" the stenographer read back in a monotone.

"I certainly did not," Jerry replied.

Freeman was looking at him as if he were a fascinating but repugnant specimen under a microscope. It had dawned on Jerry by now that his reservations about Freeman had been justified, that he himself had been cast in the coveted role of murderer-confronted-in-the-courtroom, and that Freeman now was working on formulating just the right question to make him jump up and shout, "Yes, I did it!"—maybe whipping out a rod and waving it around the courtroom, expressing a refusal to be taken alive. Jerry's perverse humor almost made him do it, minus the rod, just to see what effect it would have on the lawyers, the gallery, and that terminally laid-back judge—it would help get Don off, but he was pretty sure the judge wouldn't find it amusing, nor presumably would Mrs. Diaz.

After a prolonged staring match, Freeman merely said, "No more questions," probably feeling he'd got all he was going to from the suggestion. "Your witness."

Carol Booth was brief. "Mr. Brogan, you have testified that you did not have an affair with Gloria Diaz?"

"Correct. That never happened."

"And do you have any knowledge of anyone else having an affair with Gloria Diaz?"

"No. Not that I would expect to know if they were."

"Please just answer the questions, Mr. Brogan. Did you kill Michael Diaz?"

"No."

"You have testified that you did not see the defendant slip anything into the salsa?"

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"That is correct."

"But you were not watching the salsa continuously throughout the meal, were you?"

"Of course not."

"Didn't know it would be so important, did you?" she added with a smile.

"No."

"So you cannot say that the defendant did not in fact slip something into the salsa, can you?"

"It seems like a foolish thing to do at a table with five other people."

"That was not my question, Mr. Brogan. You cannot swear that Donald Goossen didn't put anything in the salsa, can you?"

"No, I can't."

Carol Booth then devoted a series of questions to the more mundane part of Jerry's testimony, casting doubt on whether a jockey's race-riding style really said anything about his general character as a human being, wondering if hand-riding rather than using the whip evinced a high degree of humanity or just a continued application of a technique that had worked well in the past, suggesting that a rapport with animals in no way precluded cruelty to fellow humans. Finally, she said, "No more questions."

"Mr. Freeman?" the judge said.

"No more questions."

"The witness is excused."

As Jerry walked by the defense table, Don Goossen put a hand on his sleeve and said quietly, "I didn't know he was going to do that, Jerry." Jerry was glad to hear it. But he was less happy that Don's manner suggested he didn't find the charge of Jerry's affair with Gloria Diaz that unbelievable. Jerry wondered how he would explain this in-court defamation to a certain high-school drama teacher of his acquaintance, while realizing that was the least of his worries at the moment.

In the local television news account of the trial, Jerry learned that an earlier defense witness, the vice president of Diaz's auto-supply company, had provided what foundation George Freeman had for his unexpected line of questioning: a day or two before his death, Michael Diaz had told his associate, a boyhood friend, that his wife Gloria had been having an affair and that he expected to take the pair of them unawares at a little dinner party he was having. That combined with the comparative handiness of the salsa dish to Jerry's

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place at the table had led Freeman to ask the question he did. But there were other considerations Freeman hadn't taken into account.

After the news and a light dinner that found his usually prodigious appetite in eclipse, Jerry took desperate measures: he decided to talk the case over with his mystery-loving Aunt Olivia. It seemed he had entered her turf—hers and Freeman's—and if she couldn't help Jerry solve the thing, at least she would better understand how the lawyer's mind worked.

Peering across at him in her mystery-lined library, her ever-present cat Seabiscuit purring at her feet, Olivia Barchester said, "We will assume that you did not kill Michael Diaz."

"Thank you," Jerry replied gratefully.

"And must we also assume that Donald Goossen is innocent?"

"If it's not too much trouble." Mustn't be sarcastic, Jerry admonished himself—but why should she feel hampered by having to consider Don innocent? In her world, no defendant in a murder trial could possibly be guilty.

"Don't forget," Aunt Olivia pointed out, "if Don Goossen *had* been the person having the affair with Mrs. Diaz, and if Diaz had found out, that would give him an even stronger motive for the crime."

"So he could marry Stacey? But Mrs. Diaz would still be alive to cause him trouble. Look, I agree that having Don be the murderer after all would be a dandy double-reverse, but I know the guy, and it never happened, believe me."

"Then let us consider the other possibilities. I trust it could have been suicide. Michael Diaz could have put the poison in the salsa himself, perhaps intending to make it look like murder and implicate his daughter's unwelcome suitor and/or his wife's lover."

Jerry shrugged. "Seems out of character. And death by cyanide is not a pleasant thing to inflict on oneself. Besides, I don't really see that he had a motive for such extreme action."

"Fine. Eliminate that. I never liked the suicide solution anyway. Seems like a cheat. Now, we must consider the fact that both Gloria Diaz and the trainer Victor Hamblen claim to have seen Donald Goossen make some sort of suspicious pass over the salsa. If Donald Goossen is not guilty, why would he have done that? And if he did not do that, why would the two of them have said he did? If Gloria Diaz did in fact have a lover, if this was the dinner party at which Diaz expected to confront the lover, and if the lover is not you—" She stopped and wrinkled her forehead in thought. "Was anyone invited to this dinner who did not appear?"

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"I'm pretty sure not. Except for Donna. She was supposed to come with me but had to call some kind of emergency rehearsal and canceled out. I wish she'd been there. An extra pair of eyes."

"So there were no other male invitees. Only one candidate is le then. Could Victor Hamblen be Mrs. Diaz's lover, threatened with exposure, and could they thus have been accomplices in murde making up the sleight-of-hand action to implicate Mr. Goossen?"

Jerry nodded, a little irritated to be cast as Watson to a theory obvious. "I did think of that, believe it or not. But if so, how did they introduce the poison into the salsa between the time I had some and the time Diaz got the fatal dose?" Jerry grinned. "I know. They put it in before I had my last helping, but somebody had been secretly feeding me increasing doses of cyanide over a period of months, and I'd built up a tolerance to it."

Aunt Olivia took it not as a joke but as a serious theory. "That occurs with arsenic, not cyanide," she said kindly, like a doting teacher correcting a promising student. "But consider this. I would imagine there was a great deal of confusion around the table when Mr. Diaz was first stricken, am I not right?"

"Well, certainly, it was a very upsetting event. Diaz had these terrible convulsions—"

She raised a delicate hand. "Spare me the unpleasant details."

"I thought it was *all* damned unpleasant," Jerry said. "I know the killings in the books you read are pretty bloodless, but in real life—"

"Please, Jerry, the victims in the books I read die the same way as people in real life in the same circumstances—there just isn't all this gratuitous wallowing in graphic detail, which is quite unnecessary in my view."

She reached down and scooped up Seabiscuit, who accepted her attention with an air of noblesse oblige. "I almost lost my train of thought," she said, "but fortunately not quite. I think I'm getting somewhere here, and I hope to take you with me. Now, then. There was confusion on the scene. You were all upset. You had to try to revive Diaz. Someone had to call 911 and get the paramedics on the way. You weren't all watching the table and, not suspecting foul play at this point, you certainly weren't watching each other very carefully."

"Okay, that's right. Therefore?"

"Therefore someone could have introduced the cyanide into the salsa *after* Diaz's attack. Mrs. Diaz could have done it, or Victor Hamblen."

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Jerry mulled that over and nodded. "Okay, I guess that could have happened, but if so, how did Diaz get poisoned?"

"If I remember my Agatha Christie correctly, cyanide is usually instantaneous in its effects, but not invariably. Diaz could have been poisoned earlier, but for whatever reason his reaction to the poison could have been delayed. Something to do with metabolism, perhaps. Or maybe Diaz was taking some kind of medication—"

"He was!" Jerry remembered. "I saw him take a capsule before dinner, looked like an old Tylenol. He said he'd been taking it for toothache."

"A capsule? Not a tablet?"

"No, I'm sure it was a capsule."

"The ideal medium for a delayed-action poisoning," Aunt Olivia said. "Commercial pain relievers usually don't come in capsule form anymore for that very reason. The murderer could have introduced the cyanide into Diaz's medication. Who better than a wife to be able to manage that, knowing what he took and when he was likely to take it? Then she took the opportunity *after* his death to put the cyanide in the salsa and thus set up a situation that would implicate someone else."

"How would she know Diaz was going to die in the middle of the dinner?"

"She wouldn't. But when he did and the placement of the salsa bowl indicated a likely patsy, she was clever enough to see the opportunity for misdirection and take it. Clever murderers are always ready to improvise."

"In books they are," Jerry muttered.

"I used to know Victor Hamblen years ago when the Barchester stable was active. He was spineless then, so I doubt he's grown one by now. The fact that he had the gumption to support Gloria on the question of Flame Thrower's proposed comeback even *weakly* corroborates the possibility of some kind of involvement between them. A woman like Gloria Diaz could wrap Victor around her finger quite easily, get him to do her bidding. But some smart questioning from the police would probably cause him to cave in without much resistance. I doubt it would be his own idea to frame a jockey for the crime, but you've told me Gloria Diaz didn't want to see Donald Goossen allied with her daughter any more than her husband did. I think she saw the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. The chance to frame Goossen was an unexpected bonus."

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Jerry looked at his aunt marvelingly. He certainly had come to the right place. "Maybe I should give George Freeman a call," he said.

"Oh no, I'll do it. After all, we speak the same language."

That's for sure, Jerry thought. Listening to her side of the conversation, he had the feeling they were brightly discussing a game, and never once did she admonish the lawyer for implying in court that her nephew might be a murderer. Perhaps, Jerry reflected, the accusation was excused because he hadn't done it in the last chapter.

No longer excluded by his status as a witness, Jerry was able to attend the prosecution and defense summations in the case of *California v. Goossen*. When Carol Booth spoke, calmly and effectively, Don Goossen still sounded guilty as sin. But George Freeman did a masterful job of presenting a reasonable alternative to his client's guilt, pointing out how the discovery of the cyanide in the salsa could have served to divert the investigators from considering other possible sources of the poison. That was all he had to do. True, the advocate may have been disappointed that Mrs. Diaz didn't jump up in the courtroom and confess any more than Jerry had, but she did decide to plead guilty a few weeks later thanks to some dogged police work and her accomplice's predicted cave-in.

Now dealing with that high-school drama teacher was the greatest of Jerry's problems—and it proved to be no problem at all.

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In collaboration with her husband, Edgar-winning writer David Stout, Ruthe Furie authored the 1990 suspense novel Hell Gate, *and in the nineteen seventies placed two humor short stories with a hockey magazine. This is, however, her first mystery solo, and we think you'll like the voice. . . .*

BEFORE MY EYES

by RUTHE FURIE

People were being tossed and battered. Blood was spattering on the walls, on the lampshades, across the coffee table. Blood in pools beside twisted bodies. Screams, moans, hard objects hitting flesh, shots, gasping. Was I dreaming?

I opened my eyes.

Flickering light came from across the room, an unfamiliar room. Television, I thought with relief. But the relief was momentary. The square of light gave onto the floor, revealing what I had hoped was a dream.

Blood, so much blood, and people lying still, parts of them looking like meat. I could see the open eyes of one, a man about forty. The eyes didn't move, didn't blink.

I was afraid to move. Would the sounds start again? Where was I? What had happened in this room? Where were the monsters who were responsible for this carnage?

The man with the open eyes was lying closest to me, his left arm stretched toward me. Blood had trickled from his mouth. Under him was a large dark stain. I was sure it was blood, even though the light was too dim to show colors clearly.

Two other bodies, across the room, were lying so close it seemed they must have fallen together. They looked young, perhaps late teens or early twenties. Both, a boy and a girl, were wearing jeans and T-shirts. Their feet were toward me, four jogging shoes with thick treads.

Her hair was long, and some of it had fallen on his face, some on her face, as if she had turned her face as she fell.

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I listened. Someone else must be in this house. But I heard nothing.

I wondered whether I was hurt. I tried to tamp down the fear so that I could pay attention to my body, check it for pain. I felt nothing, no pain, no heat, no cold. Nothing. I was on a couch, leaning back, my head back slightly. I hadn't moved since I opened my eyes. Nothing in the room had moved except the light from the television. I couldn't make out the picture and there was no sound coming from the set. No sound in the house. No sound coming from outside the house.

Get up. I should get up and get out of here, I thought. But the thought would not translate into action. I couldn't move. I couldn't raise my head from where it rested. I tried to raise my arm, my hand, a finger. Nothing worked, except my eyes. I could open them, close them, move them from side to side.

What had happened to me? Was I wounded? Bleeding? Dying as the others in the room had? Who were these people? Where was I? How did I get here?

I had no answers. And then the most crucial of all questions occurred to me, and I couldn't answer that either. Who was I?

I didn't remember.

I remembered the awful minutes of screams and shots and people being hurt, but before that my memory was empty. I wasn't even sure how long I was going to live. I couldn't feel.

Was blood dripping slowly from me, emptying my veins, my life ebbing? Would I be as dead as the others in minutes, hours?

Fear rose again in a rush as I saw light moving in the hallway on the other side of the television. And then a man appeared in the doorway. I closed my eyes until they were slits.

Oh God, he's come to finish me off, I thought.

But the man stood there, moving his mouth, turning his head. Then another man appeared. They turned on an overhead light and I could see through my lashes that they had uniforms on, police uniforms. They walked around the room carefully, looking at the bodies, looking at the wounds. They were quiet. Silent. I saw them move their mouths but I heard no sounds.

Deaf. I'm deaf, I thought. I can't move. I can't hear. I can't feel anything. I tried to move my lips, but nothing happened. Only my eyes moved.

I opened them. I blinked. I tried to get their attention with my eyes, but they didn't see. They were drawing chalk lines around the bodies.

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One of the officers was standing over me. He started to draw around me. I waited. Waited. When he drew the line around my head, he would have to see my eyes. I blinked and blinked.

Look at me. Look at me. I was shouting from inside. But, of course, he heard nothing. He didn't see my frantic blinking. He was so intent on his chalk line.

So. They think I'm dead, I thought. Here in this room with the other dead people. I'm immobile. The others are dead, so I must be, too. You stupid dolts! Take my pulse! Look in my eyes!

There were two other officers chalking around the boy and girl. They seemed to be having trouble deciding how to draw around them, because the boy and girl were somewhat intertwined. His leg was between hers and his arm was under her body. There were big bloody spots on the fronts of their T-shirts. I could see more now that the lights were on.

I kept watching, hoping one of them would look at me. I kept blinking. But they were on the other side of the room, and even when I was looking at them, my eyes weren't wide open because my head was tilted back.

Please, let them look at me, I prayed. I'm not dead yet. I prayed and blinked. Someone would have to look at me eventually. Wouldn't they?

Panic, even worse than before, was tearing at me. Panic rising as the officers went about their rituals of death. And when other men came in with body bags, I must have passed out.

I couldn't have been out long, but it was long enough for them to have stuffed the forty-year-old man into a body bag. I came to as they were zipping him up. And it was when they were zipping him up that it happened.

Like a flood. A flood that started with the name Ike. Ike. My husband, who had died reaching toward me. The man on the floor, the forty-year-old man, my husband of twenty-two years who was actually forty-five.

Now I knew it all, remembered what had happened in that unfamiliar house that I had lived in for fifteen years.

Tears were running from my eyes now. I could feel them hot in my eyes, but I couldn't feel them on my face. I remembered the boy and the girl, who were being separated and put in bags.

The girl was my daughter, Trish, my only child. The boy, Greg, was her boyfriend. They were both eighteen and had just been graduated from high school. They had barely made it. Trish's marks had

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gone down drastically when she started seeing Greg.

How could I have forgotten Trish? Trish, the answer to our prayers, Ike's and mine. We had adopted her when she was an infant. She never gave us any trouble. Never. Until she met Greg.

They were always asking us for money. We gave and gave. We worried, but we gave it to them. We didn't want to lose her. Then they began to ask for more, bigger amounts. And tonight, I said no.

They began to push me around. Still I refused to give them the money they had asked for. Then they hit me with books, threw things at me. I still refused to give them money. Then Trish picked up the poker from beside the fireplace.

"No, Trish, I'm your mother," I screamed.

"No, you're not," she yelled back and brought the poker down onto my head.

"No, you're not," she'd said, my Trish.

I fell back onto the couch as Ike came into the room. I saw the gun in his hands. I tried to shout at him, but I couldn't. He looked at me with his face full of worry and then turned to Trish and Greg. When he looked at them, all that was left in his face was anger.

He shot at both of them. Trish started to fall, but Greg held her with one arm and pulled a gun from his pocket with the other hand. Greg shot at Ike and Ike fell toward me, reaching for me.

Trish and Greg fell together. I heard them fall. They moaned when they fell. Those were the last sounds I heard.

And now they were in separate body bags. Ike was in a bag. And they were coming for me.

I had remembered, and with the memory, I didn't care whether they zipped me into a bag. My life, what had been my life, was gone. Ike and Trish—in bags.

I saw the cop bending over me, zipping up the bag.

And suddenly he was looking into my eyes. My eyes hot with tears.

His lips were moving. He was waving his arms. He unzipped the bag. He looked at me kindly.

He was saying something to me.

I could see him patting my hand.

I blinked. ●

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With six Lady Margaret Priam mystery novels under her belt, all published by Fawcett Books, author Joyce Christmas has decided to try her sleuth on this shorter case. This month she will also break new ground with a second series of mystery novels for Fawcett Books. . . .

SECONDHAND ROSE

by JOYCE CHRISTMAS

Lady Margaret Priam became aware of the growing murmur outside the door that led into the stone-walled basement of the Upper East Side (and very upper class) church that had been donated for use by the annual charity sale of discarded luxury wearables of New York society. The pale gray stone walls gave the big room a vaguely gothic feel, notwithstanding the thoroughly utilitarian fluorescent lights that marched across the low ceiling.

The sale was but minutes away. Ten, to be precise.

"We'll do so well today, all these *divine* designer frocks," Lucia Winchester said to Margaret. Lucia was one of the painfully thin sisterhood who lunched on meager salads at all the best places, but she was not as young as the deft plastic surgeon's knife and the expert hair colorist had attempted to make her. She must have known it, and very likely it troubled her greatly when she stood before the three-way mirror in the dressing room of her handsome Park Avenue apartment in full party-going regalia. Happily, the legs were still good.

"They *are* a bit out of date or we wouldn't have them," Lucia went on. Her hair was pulled back and fastened by one of those big black velvet bows. Terribly girlish; it didn't take a year away from her. "The furs alone! I know a *great* many women refuse to wear fur nowadays, but that's to our advantage. Look at those cast-off minks and foxes! Of course no one would donate a sable no matter how committed to animal . . . things. It would be like giving away the Mercedes!"

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Her high-pitched, nervous laugh occurred without her opening her mouth.

"Just my little joke," Lucia said hastily, "but my *dear* Lady Margaret, when you think how much *we* paid for all these lovely things, it's almost a *sin*. Well, all for a good cause. There are even a few of my old things—old friends really—going off to help the less fortunate. Alvin says he'll get a nice deduction . . ." That laugh again. "You know how husbands are!"

Even Lucia Winchester had to pause for breath, but Lady Margaret was caught off guard by the sudden cessation of speech.

"It does look promising," Margaret said quickly, and saw that Lucia was surveying the portable pipe racks of gowns, dresses, jackets, knitwear, and coats with a look of narrow-eyed concentration, as though she were seeing many, many old friends about to be sent off to unspeakable fates in Queens or Brooklyn or even the Bronx. The ladies on Lucia's committee, however, did not seem troubled by the fate of the clothes as they busily arranged items on display tables and chattered animatedly.

Margaret really had no clear idea of what sort of people waited behind the mighty basement door prepared to pick over a great many size six frocks that might have appeared in the pages of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* two or three years ago. Other than the quality of the merchandise, however, she expected it would not be much different from the village jumble sales back home in her native England: one woman's unwearables were another's treasures.

"Some *exquisite* Kenny Lane costume jewelry, did you see it?" Lucia was saying. "And *wonderful* handbags. The men's clothes too—shirts, ties, jackets, even evening wear. The lapels aren't quite *right* for this year, but the buyers will never notice."

What Margaret had mostly noticed was that she, a titled expatriate Brit living in New York on fairly modest means, could never have afforded the original retail prices of the donated goods. In fact, she would have loved the chance to pick through the racks prior to the sale, but Lucia had been adamant about not allowing her committee women to enjoy pre-sale privileges. Something about those substantial tax deductions allowed the contributors, or perhaps it was merely to keep the volunteers from engaging in indecorous struggles over a Valentino or a Lagerfeld outfit that was only the tiniest bit passé.

"And *dear* Lady Margaret . . ." The title rolled trippingly and unctuously from Lucia's tongue. Her rosy lips, which would have made

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Estee Lauder and the entire cosmetics department of Bloomingdale's proud, curved into a bright if insincere smile. ". . . we on the committee are so *honored* that you could find time to help us." She didn't quite curtsy. Margaret, in her mid-thirties, thought it unseemly to be fawned over by a woman twenty-five years her senior (but who might admit under torture to fifteen).

Margaret said, "I'm sure I'll have no trouble handling the cashbox, and it's really my privilege to assist . . ." She couldn't for the moment remember the charity she'd been roped into working for by her dear friend Dianne Stark. ". . . your wonderful organization."

Lucia Winchester wasn't listening. Her eyes, with their discreet application of liner, shadow, highlighter, and mascara, were darting nervously about the low-ceilinged basement. The committee ladies in their expensive suits and sweater sets were beginning to take up their posts at the tables set up about the room. Margaret had drawn cashier duty, and was near the exit where all would stop to pay for their selections.

Dianne Stark, looking well-put-together, as befitted a young Manhattan socialite with a rich husband, carried one more armload of dresses from the back room where the clothes were priced and hung them on a metal rack.

"Curtain up, almost," Dianne said as she joined Margaret and Lucia. "I have just put a modest price tag on one of my very own dresses. Paid a fortune for it, but Charlie hated it right from the start, so here it is."

Charles Stark and his much younger wife Dianne were shining lights of marital happiness in society's often cruel and unhappy world—probably because Dianne was willing to surrender to charity a beloved frock her husband disliked.

"We do get the tax deduction," Dianne said, "but that scarcely makes up for donating a dress one bought at the designer's spring show in Paris only two years ago. Margaret darling, if you ever decide to marry that beau of yours, take my word. No dress is worth a household disruption. You can always quiver a lip and get a more acceptable one."

Lucia's smile was wan. "You're so witty, Dianne. Ah-*ha!* That . . . that *woman* has put the scarves and belts in the *wrong* place. I *told* her near the sweaters, the accessories near the *sweaters.*" Lucia flew across the room to the offending display, where a slim, attractive young woman with stunning red hair and pale, per-

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fect skin was arranging and rearranging pretty little items on two card tables set together.

"I shouldn't have said that," Dianne said in a low voice. "I am ashamed. Poor Lucia's quivering lips don't carry much weight these days."

Margaret shook her head in ignorance.

"The Winchester marriage is in trouble. Everybody knows. Alvin Winchester has his trophy wife picked out—younger, prettier—who's waiting in the wings for poor Lucia to be offloaded into the limbo of dumped Park Avenue wives. You never keep up with the gossip."

"Oh . . ." Margaret felt a genuine pang of sympathy for the tiresome Lucia. "Do I know her?" Then she caught herself. Manhattan society gossip could indeed become addicting. "I shouldn't be asking." Yet, in spite of herself, she was curious.

Dianne lifted her chin in the direction of the counter where Lucia was briskly dragging the accessories tables to the spot where sweaters and blouses were piled, while the red-haired woman watched unsmilingly. "That's her. Verity Humble. Very brave of Lucia to have her on the committee, don't you think? As if nobody knew."

"Brave of Miss Humble to accept under the circumstances." Margaret recognized Verity Humble. "I believe I saw her at a cocktail party last month. She was with some well-fed man three times her age. Oh! Would it have been the straying Mr. Winchester?"

Dianne nodded. "While Lucia was out in Arizona at Canyon Ranch getting slimmed and aerobicized. Look—everybody is watching them."

The committee ladies were, indeed, frozen in place, pretending not to notice that Lucia wore a bright, hate-filled smile as she fussed about with handfuls of scarves. Verity stood stonefaced behind the table.

"I hope," Margaret said softly, "there won't be any trouble."

Then the great wooden door opened, and a surge of women and a few men poured into the basement.

"No, no!" Lucia's voice rose shrilly above the chatter. "*All* bags and coats *must* be checked outside." She flew across the room and hustled a bewildered middle-aged woman in a trench coat with a large canvas shoulder bag back into the hall.

Dianne smiled cynically. "They steal, some of them. The nicest-looking people, too. Look, there's Benny Close. Do you know him? He does the costumes for an Off-Broadway theater company that

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Charlie and I support. Delightful man. He comes every year to pick up things for new productions."

Dianne waved to a broad, short man with a reddish face, a shock of white hair, and a tweedy jacket with leather elbow patches. He responded with a courtly bow and then elbowed an elderly woman neatly out of his way in order to go through a rack of evening gowns.

Lucia was back, breathing heavily from her encounter with the rumored Other Woman in her domestic upheaval as well as with the offending canvas bag. "Now remember, Lady Margaret. One of you takes the money and makes change, the other bags the goods and staples the bag. For the jewelry and small items, we do it in the European style. The volunteers give the customer a sales check, she pays you, you initial it, and Madame Customer hands the receipt back to receive her pretty little faux diamond pin. Got that?"

"Got it," Margaret said. The words didn't sound quite right in her English accent, but never mind.

"What *is* going on over there? They're throwing those lovely things around as if they were rags! Miss Humble really should be keeping them under control." Gravely incensed now, Lucia was off again, ostensibly to keep order, but perhaps to take this new opportunity to pour her wrath out on flame-haired Verity Humble.

"If you don't mind . . ." A dumpy young woman in a heavy turtleneck and jeans thrust a satin and chiffon evening dress at Margaret. "I want to pay for this."

The dress was priced at a hundred dollars—probably nine hundred or so less than it had cost brand new. It was not remotely the young woman's size, but who was Margaret to argue? She took her money, and gave the dress to Dianne to wrap.

Dianne said, "Hello, Benny. Found something to tempt you?"

Benny beamed. "Have I ever, Dianne my pet. Just what one always hopes to find. Somebody has been exceedingly generous."

Benny held up a beautiful long black taffeta gown with a graceful, wide skirt, a deep V neckline, and a huge red silk rose at the waist. It was not a current fashion by any means, but Margaret recognized it as one of those classics that live forever. People in England didn't donate dresses like this one. If they had them, they trotted them out year after year.

"I caught a glimpse of one or two other things as well," Benny said, "but these women attack like sharks." He shrugged. "They never see the really good things, so I'll take my time."

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"It's a gift you have, Benny," Dianne said, "being able to spot a designer from fifty paces. Who did this one?"

"You'd recognize the name," he said coyly. "One of those single-name fellows . . ."

"Can we keep that here behind the table for you?" Margaret asked. She rather wanted a look at the name on the label.

Benny shook his head. "Not this piece," he said, clutching the black dress to his chest. "Amazing what you find stuffed away in a corner among the secondhand lacy peignoirs and velvet dressing gowns." He shifted the gown to his arm, and looked questioningly at Margaret. "Lady Margaret Priam, is it? I thought I recognized you. And have seen your name in the social columns, of course."

As Margaret handed over change to a woman who was buying several blouses and an alligator bag—at a very reasonable price—she was aware that Benny Close was looking her up and down, taking in her short blond hair, rosy English complexion, her heavy silk blouse and nubby green wool skirt cinched at the waist with a supple leather belt.

"Dianne says nice things about you, Mr. Close," Margaret said. "I understand your talents are legendary."

"Then you must come along to our new production to see," he said. "We're doing *The Women*. Clare Boothe wrote it back in the thirties, but it's still so wonderfully bitchy and *so* timely still. I envision *very* fancy dress. I have a Halston number and a Christian LaCroix you wouldn't believe, and now this. I'd love to find more sequins, and another true classic like this one. Ah, Lucia darling. You're the woman with a wardrobe to dream about. Such exquisite taste, and over so many years."

Lucia flushed beneath her well-contrived makeup. "Benny, I . . . I see you're planning to contribute to our little charity with a purchase." She made a fluttery gesture toward the dress. "Wherever did you find that old thing? I don't remember seeing it on the racks."

"This old thing was stuffed in among the men's suits, and it will do for my second act. Isn't that little Verity Humble over there? Such a beauty."

Margaret tried to determine, in between making change and handing garments over to Dianne for bagging, whether there was anything malicious in Benny's voice or demeanor. He surely could not have spoken with perfect innocence, but his expression was cheerfully bland.

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Lucia was another matter. If looks could kill was an understatement. Dianne caught Margaret's eye and winced.

Benny went on as if Lucia Winchester wasn't sincerely wishing him dead. "Yes, I do need more sparkle."

"I saw several things out there," Dianne said quickly. "Forty-pound beaded jackets and skimpy little sequined dresses—the sort of things you can only wear once because they're so noticeable, and people do remember, and then they think you can't afford . . ."

Margaret knew Dianne was not so insecure that she'd not dare to wear the same outfit twice to a gala. She must be trying to ease the tension Benny had created.

"I must see about straightening out those racks," Lucia said coldly. "These people have no sense of the niceties. Dianne, do see that the people in line are taken care of. We don't have time to waste on chatting with our friends." Lucia turned on her heel and plunged into the throng.

Benny looked after her with a strange, sad smile, and shook his head. "She was a real beauty once, and now she's not giving up gracefully. Of course, she's never forgiven me for introducing Alvin to a lovely little actress a few years back who's gone on to do *quite* well in television. And of course, she never invites me to her little dinners and the like anymore."

The line at the cashbox was beginning to build. Apparently many of the customers at the sale were experts at combing the merchandise quickly and escaping fast with their goodies.

"Look at that!" Margaret exclaimed suddenly and rather too loudly.

A very tall woman in an elaborate frosted hairdo and really extreme makeup made a grand entrance. She wore impossibly high-heeled boots, tight jeans, and a shocking-pink satin blouse dripping with faux Chanel chains. The bargain hunters fell back at her progress.

Dianne looked up from folding a very nice cashmere sweater. "Oh, him," she said. "He shows up every year. He likes the finer things in life, wardrobe-wise."

The man—for indeed it was a man—headed for the dress racks.

Benny said, "That one has a better eye than even I do. I'd best get back to my search before I lose out on all the good things."

The line at the cashbox was becoming impatient, so Margaret and Dianne were forced to concentrate on totaling purchases, making change, and wrapping the goods. From time to time, Margaret

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caught glimpses of that mass of frosted hair above the racks of dresses and coats. Lucia seemed to have disappeared, although her arch foe Verity Humble bustled out of the back room with a new pile of belts, scarves, and handbags to replenish the accessories tables. Benny Close had accumulated a real armload now; he appeared to have discovered plenty of sparkle among the goods for sale.

"Won't someone please relieve us for lunch," Dianne muttered as noon approached, then said brightly to an older lady who had purchased a pair of barely worn Manilo Blahnik shoes, "I hope you enjoy them, ma'am, and thank you so very much." Dianne, having begun her adult life as a flight attendant, was very good with the public.

"I could use a sit down," Margaret said. The line had diminished considerably. "Handle the money for a moment, and let me see if I can't find Lucia to win a temporary reprieve from our post."

As Margaret made her way across the basement toward the back room where the donated clothes had been unpacked and priced, a terrific scream bounced off the low ceiling and the stone walls. The few customers froze, then slowly turned their heads in the direction of the scream. The chins of committee ladies behind the jewelry table dropped in a most unbecoming fashion.

Margaret kept moving forward, glancing between the pipe racks still laden with dresses, suits, and coats.

She reached the end of the room where the men's clothes were hanging. Between a rack of suits and another of sports jackets and casual shirts in designs no man she knew would consider for a second, she came upon a pale middle-aged woman clutching two neckties in one hand and the other to her mouth. She was staring down at the body of Benny Close surrounded by the fashion treasures he'd acquired. His normally reddish face was more or less purplish now and his open eyes stared blindly at the ceiling. There was something metal and gold around his neck.

The woman took her hand from her mouth and appeared to be on the brink of another scream.

"Don't!" Margaret said sharply.

The woman gulped and didn't.

Dianne came up behind Margaret. "Oh, Benny! Is he all right?"

"I think not," Margaret said. "Close the main door and keep everyone over there. Have someone call an ambulance—and the police, I think."

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"What *now?*" Lucia bustled out of the back room. Hysteria lay close to the surface. She stopped short when she saw Benny.

Margaret knelt beside him, but it was clear that he was dead, strangled by one of those pretty heavy chain belts that had become so widely popular that the upper crust felt the need to dispose of theirs and move on to new fashion horizons. She looked up to see all of the committee ladies, and the few customers, including the man in women's clothes, craning their necks to see the awful sight.

It must be rather like reality television to them, Margaret thought. "Please go away," she said aloud. Then she stood up and looked over the crowd, which appeared to have no intention of moving back. Red-haired Verity Humble, the keeper of the bags, scarves, and belts, was not among them.

"Go over there," she said in a commanding voice. They blinked, and they all moved.

"I was looking for a jacket in my husband's size," the woman who'd found Benny said, "and look what happens. They told me this sale was run by a nice class of women."

"Perhaps only in their own minds," Margaret said. She was staring at Benny surrounded by his selections. The red and yellow sequin design on the front of a rather elaborate gown sparkled in the overhead fluorescent lights.

Margaret didn't want to touch anything until the professionals arrived, and yet . . . She pushed the clothes gently with her toe, disarranging them as little as possible until she was satisfied.

"Lucia, we'd better wait with the others by the door for the ambulance and the police. They'll want to speak with you."

"Me? Why me?"

"You're the chairperson. Did you notice what's become of Verity Humble? She seems to have disappeared."

"Verity!" Lucia fastened on that quickly. "Of course! She took one of those belts and . . . there's a back door. Poor, poor Benny. He was such a nice man, one of the few theater people we ever invited to our home. How could she do this?" Lucia's makeup wasn't holding up well, and neither was she. "Verity is *not* a nice person. This just proves it."

"Mmmm," Margaret said noncommittally. She wondered if Verity's lack of niceness was more a matter of leaving a mess she didn't want to be involved in than creating the mess in the first place. Margaret took Lucia's elbow and guided her to the exit door near the cashier's table. The committee ladies withdrew to little whispering

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clumps, having seen enough of a dead man in the midst of all their former finery.

The frosted-haired person said in a husky voice, "Is one of you in charge?" He fastened on Margaret. "He had a lovely *robe de bal* I had my eye on, yellow and red sequins, but he got to it before I did. You think I could . . . ?"

"Sorry," Margaret said. "The sale is suspended."

Dianne said, "Sit down, Lucia. You look awful."

"It was a terrible shock," Lucia said mechanically. "Losing an old friend like that."

Dianne looked at Margaret, puzzled, and started to speak. Margaret motioned for her to keep silent. Dianne was going to protest that Benny was scarcely an old friend of Lucia's.

"It might make you feel better if you talked," Margaret said, then added casually, "I suppose we'll find it in the back room, Lucia. I do understand."

"I don't," Dianne murmured.

"Nor do I," Lucia said somewhat shrilly. "Send the police after that woman. I really have to put myself together. I must look a fright." She started to stand.

"You look fine," Margaret said untruthfully, "and you do understand me." It was tempting simply to allow Lucia to go off to fix her face and slip out the back way. "I know what you did."

Lucia gave up. "It was the most wonderful dress I ever owned, and naturally I own a great many superb things. Givenchy made it just for me nearly thirty years ago. He gave it to me with his own hands, practically. I was photographed in it by Norman Parkinson. It's a museum piece now. I was planning to leave it to the Metropolitan Museum's costume collection when I died." She looked up at Margaret, and the facade of proud society matron crumbled. She was merely an unhappy middle-aged woman on the brink of losing her husband and her gratifying social circumstances. "It's even in my will," she said. "Alvin kept nagging me to get rid of my clothes, clear out the closets—I do have really lovely big closets." She sniffed back a tear. "He wanted me to contribute things to the sale that I never wore. He didn't understand, but I thought if I did whatever he asked, he'd think twice about that—that—woman."

"So you donated it and then hid it away here. You planned to take it back, but Benny poked around and found it. Maybe he even recognized it as yours? Well, never mind that, but, Lucia, why did you bring it here at all? A friend could have kept it for you."

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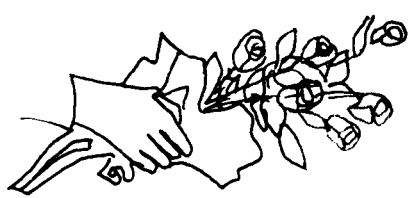
Lucia tried to speak, and then the big tears began to slip down her cheeks, severely damaging her makeup. "Alvin was there when I packed my dresses, he made a list for tax purposes, he was with me when our driver dropped me off here. How could you know what happened with Benny?"

"There was no black dress with a big red rose among the clothes he had with him when his body was found," Margaret said. "From what he said, he wouldn't give that dress up. Someone who wanted it badly would have had to kill him to take it from him."

What Margaret thought was: People will do amazing things to protect old friends.



DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY CRIMES II

by GLORIA ROSENTHAL

Tom Tom the piper's son,
Stole a pig and away did run;
But instead of getting "1 to 3"
He's free because he copped a plea.

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

So convincing is Donald Olson's portrait of a "blocked" writer in this new tale that we might suspect he knows whereof he speaks were it not for his extraordinary output of first-rate stories! Besides, if Mr. Olson's thoughts turned to murder, it would surely be on the page . . .

WILLIE'S LAST TRIP

by DONALD OLSON

Except for my neighbor across the hall I have no friends here at the Spanish Gates, nor am I likely to have. Unless a miracle occurs I won't be able to stay here much longer; they've just raised the rent again and I am already beyond the break-even point.

I rise and shower and shave, the dullness of my razor blade demonstrating to what extent I'm obliged to practice even the most trivial of demeaning economies. Which reminds me, I must get to the stationery store; my agent, the last time I heard from her, suggested tactfully it might be time I invested in a new typewriter ribbon.

Dragging myself to the ancient Royal, I force myself to overcome the paralyzing inertia that set in the same morning my neighbor Willie Van Netten burst into my apartment with a handful of travel folders about Mexico. As he started babbling about the latest trip he was planning, that insidious worm of envy, nourished by too many descriptions of Willie's exotic holidays, began to swell into a monster of hatred.

Above my desk hangs a small reproduction of an eighteenth-century print titled "The Swiss Drummer." In the forefront a figure in gold and scarlet uniform stares straight into my eyes as I lift my gaze from the typewriter, my fingers frozen above the keys as if for

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all time, like the hands of the drummer gripping his drumsticks. His piercing black eyes seem to mock the impotence of my imagination. I reach blindly for a cigarette I can't afford and which will leave me as unsatisfied as the one before. Finally, I get up and stand at the window watching the swirling eddies of snow dapple the pane, and I dream of Mexico and the sun.

The telephone rings. I know even before answering it that it will be my neighbor across the hall beseeching some favor. I will myself not to answer, but of course I do. Any excuse to escape from the typewriter.

Suddenly I make up my mind: I shall *make* that miracle happen. "Sorry, Willie, I can't possibly. I'm right in the middle of chapter eleven."

Willie brushes this quibble aside. "Rubbish, old boy. You can squeeze your writing in any time. You must come shopping with me. I need your advice."

How I loathe being told I can squeeze my writing in any time, but I hold my tongue and cross the hall. I sit in Willie's living room, my body licking up the heat like a stray dog let in from the cold. I grow even warmer with resentment as he shows me the maps spread over the coffee table. It was I who'd suggested Mexico when he was pondering where to go on his next trip. He'd grinned at me when I said I would gladly pass up any wonder in the world for a chance to see Mexico. "Then why don't you go?" he'd said. "What's it going to matter when you're dead whether you write that book or not?"

"Not all of us," I'd said drily, "have the good fortune to live on an inheritance."

Pink as a baby and nearly as bald, Willie displays an insensitivity that is probably no more than the egotist's indifference to others, and in many ways he is as artless as a child. His apartment is cluttered with a hodgepodge of possessions ordered mostly from catalogues, for he loves to have parcels delivered to his door, as if Christmas came every day. He always invites me in to admire each new purchase and I have to take care not to betray my distaste for their almost universal vulgarity. (His latest stands on the dining room table: a white plastic fountain spouting a miniature cascade of rainbow-tinted water.)

"I want a whole new wardrobe for Mexico," he announces. "So come along. I'll spring for lunch and pay for the gas, of course." Willie doesn't own a car and has a phobia about driving.

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As usual, in the stores we shop, Willie insists I model every garment; we're rather alike in build and coloring and he seems to know my taste is more trustworthy than his. Today, before ending the shopping spree, he also buys two expensive pieces of luggage, which he certainly doesn't need, and then takes me to lunch at the Ironstone, where as usual he does most of the talking. I don't mind. His words drift over my head as I try in my mind to unravel the seemingly insoluble problem of chapter eleven. And then I become aware he is talking about Monica.

"Isn't she still in Florida?" I ask.

"Of course, till the middle of April. That's where she called me from." Willie regards me with a faintly suspicious frown. "She hasn't written to you, or called you by any chance, has she?"

"Me? Why on earth should she?"

"Well, you know Monica. She's not to be trusted with a secret."

"Is there a secret?"

He mumbles some vague reply and tries to change the subject. Monica Dearing is one of Willie's oldest friends, with whom he's enjoyed what he jokingly refers to as the world's longest unofficial engagement. I don't think either of them wish to get married, for they are both set in their ways, headstrong and self-centered. I've met Monica several times at Willie's apartment and found her to be a somewhat tiresome but kindly woman with a sense of humor utterly devoid of malice.

Now I say, "You're not getting any younger, Willie. Who's going to look after you when you're old? You really ought to marry Monica. Take her to Mexico with you on a honeymoon."

His startled reaction to this makes me wonder if the idea has already occurred to him. Could this be the secret he mentioned? But then he shakes his head. "Monica hates Mexico. She's been there. Made her sick."

Presently, he says he'll spare me the bother of taking in his mail while he's away this time. "I'll have the post office hold it."

"I don't mind doing it." Willie always entrusts me with his key so I can water his plants and feed the fish and take in his paper and mail. In return, I always receive a postcard from wherever he is and on his return a souvenir of astonishing vulgarity.

"No, I must stop taking advantage of you, dear boy. Monica tells me I don't appreciate your kindness. That's not true. I hope you know that."

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Prove it, I feel like saying. Bring me back something you didn't buy in a souvenir clipjoint. Something not made of *plastic*.

Not that he will have the opportunity. Ever again. But that's *my* secret.

Across from the Spanish Gates a sprawling municipal park borders an area of dense woodland crisscrossed by bikers' trails. Because his doctor had recommended more exercise, Willie had talked me into joining him on twilight walks around the perimeter of the park, but once bad weather set in he'd lost his enthusiasm. I had not. Now, as I cross the road at sunset and wander through the park and into the woods, I know exactly where I am headed. Excitement warms my body as I reach the spot I've chosen, an area enclosed in a fortress of thorn-bearing trees. The ground is still a bit hard for digging a grave but by the end of the month, when I return from Mexico, it should be no great chore.

Who is to know poor Willie hasn't simply vanished somewhere in the wilds south of the border? It happens all the time.

As I resume my walk I review in my mind each point of my plan. Monica Dearing will not be back from Florida before the middle of April. Willie's apartment will be locked, the key in my possession. His handwriting is so deplorable he always types even his postcards while on a trip. Monica will receive several. I'll drop her a card before leaving to say a relative's sudden demise in California has necessitated my absence from the Spanish Gates. Not that there is much of a chance she'll try to get in touch with me.

Impersonating Willie in Mexico should present no difficulties or alarms, and on my return I shall have acquired a nice little grubstake from his traveling draft, credit cards, and two rings he certainly never bought out of a catalogue. But that is inconsequential. What matters is that in San Miguel de Allende I'll be able to write again. I shall be able to laugh at the Swiss Drummer and his mocking dark eyes.

How could anyone not resent Willie's selfish delight in this upcoming Mexican trip? I seemed to detect in his gloating anticipation a deliberate and callous enjoyment in provoking my envy. Is it any wonder my thoughts have turned murderous?

"Wouldn't you love to be in my shoes?" he said yesterday with a seeming clairvoyance that set my heart to thumping. "Or should I say huaraches? How can you expand your horizons without seeing

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a bit of the world? What can you write about buried in the Spanish Gates?"

Can you blame me for wanting to murder him? Wasn't he *asking* for it?

And the way he stood there, like a bantam rooster, head cocked to one side, as he insisted I again try on the white linen jacket I'd persuaded him was more suitable than the ghastly plaid he'd wanted to buy. "Can't you just see yourself, my boy, sitting on the terrace of the hotel sipping a Margarita?"

Presently, when I asked him if he was quite certain Monica wouldn't decide to return earlier than planned, he gave me a sharply inquisitive glance. "You haven't heard from her, have you? She hasn't said anything, has she?"

"You already asked me that. Of course she hasn't. But you know how unpredictable women can be."

"Not Monica. She wouldn't dream of coming back early unless she had a very pressing reason. My funeral, for instance."

This gave me a jolt. It was an effort to echo his sudden burst of laughter.

I suffer no doubts about my ability to carry out my plan to murder Willie. My consciousness of the ultimate futility of all human endeavor, coupled with a sad awareness that as an artist my vision far surpasses any gift for expressing it, makes me what I am, explains perhaps that coldness of spirit which is capable under the stress of circumstances of freezing the conscience to a state where even murder is possible. More than possible, vital. My survival as an artist is at stake; only Willie can provide the means of refreshing my deadened sensibilities. Otherwise I myself might as well be dead.

I knock on Willie's door late Sunday night, finding him in his robe, in the process of finishing packing the new suitcases. I think for an instant he regards me somewhat crossly, as if I've interrupted him in the midst of an activity I wasn't meant to witness.

"There," he says, shoving a pigskin folder into one of the bags and snapping the latch shut. "My tickets and papers are safely stowed. Here, you'd better hold on to the keys till we get to the airport. You know how forgetful I am. Hard luck if we get there in the morning and I've left the key behind."

Perhaps the only time I feel a tiny spasm of remorse is when he hands me the key: he might be delivering his very life into my hands.

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"You don't mind driving me to the airport, do you, my boy? I'm quite willing to take a cab, you know."

"Don't be silly," I say with the merest trace of acerbity. "I wouldn't miss my little game of make-believe. Pretending *I'm* the one taking off."

Now he is eager, he says, to take a warm bath and get into bed. I say I will let myself out; instead, I let myself in—into the closet just off the entrance, and there I stay until I hear Willie turn off the water in the tub. Slipping out of the closet, I pick up an ugly teakwood figurine Willie has brought back from the Philippines, steal silently into the bathroom, and with a couple of well-placed blows send poor Willie on his last trip without so much as a bon voyage.

Except for those monsters among us whose blood lust turns them into serial killers, murder is undeniably the most distasteful of acts, and for a chap as fastidious as myself it is something I should not care to do more than once in my life. Nor do I expect anyone without an artistic temperament to understand the extreme provocation that has led me to do it.

But once the blow is struck—the Rubicon crossed, so to speak—the subsequent tidying up is no more than a disagreeable chore. Cleansed in the tub, Willie's body is soon swaddled in airtight plastic and bundled into that same closet where I concealed myself, there to be left until I return from Mexico at the end of the month.

I may have geared my mind to anticipate the unforeseen; still, the ringing of the phone comes as an awful shock to my nerves. For a second I stand motionless with a pounding heart. I know I can't simply ignore it.

It's Monica.

"Sorry," I say. "Willie's in the tub. He's quite exhausted and wants to go straight to bed. We've just been finalizing the plans for tomorrow."

Her hesitation unnerves me. Has she detected something unnatural in my tone? Then: "I shouldn't have rung so late, darling. I won't disturb him. . . . Tell me the truth. Willie didn't say anything, did he?"

"About what?"

"Our little secret?"

My heart drums louder. "What secret?"

"Oh, good. I know what a blabbermouth he is."

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Willie had said the same thing about her. I begin to worry. This is no time for secrets. "Well, as a matter of fact, Monica, he did sort of hint . . . "

It's all she needs. "Darling, that man is incorrigible! I knew he'd let the cat out of the bag. Do you think it's frightfully corny of me to want a June wedding?"

My sigh of relief must be clearly audible. "I think it's marvelous. My best wishes, Monica. How's the weather in Florida?"

"Intoxicating! Well, I won't bother Willie now, darling. Give him my love."

I hang up smiling. One thing Monica need never fear is an unhappy marriage, at least to Willie. It suddenly occurrs to me that she will need a great deal of consoling when Willie never "returns" from Mexico. Monica is not unattractive, really, if you like the type, and God knows she is well-heeled.

I had planned to leave my car at home and take a taxi to the airport, and as I look down the next morning and see it waiting, I feel for the first time a vivid sense of the reality of what I am doing, while at the same time it seems no longer *I* who am doing it, as if mentally I've already assumed the identity of the man in the closet. The new luggage standing by the door is *my* luggage, containing the clothes and travel accessories *I* have shopped for. *I* am Willie Van Netten. I will *be* Willie Van Netten for thirty glorious days.

I take a final look around the apartment, carry my bags into the hall, lock the door, and walk down the three short flights of stairs. It is still not quite light. None of the other tenants is likely to be awake yet. If I encounter any of them, I'll say I have been called to the Coast by the death of a relative, the same story I've already written on the card to Monica I'll post from the airport.

I have an hour's wait before my flight is scheduled to leave, sixty minutes in which to relax without even a breath of impatience and savor the joys of anticipation. I am escaping at last from the black, accusing eyes of that Swiss drummer. Already I can feel the fresh stirring of my writer's imagination as I study the faces of my fellow travelers, my mind already storing up visions to be transmuted into fiction—and what a wealth of material yet awaits me in Mexico. I think of that tragic poet Hart Crane and of Katherine Anne Porter and all those other writers who have found spiritual nourishment under the blue Mexican skies. Wonderful, wonderful.

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Yes, I remain in a kind of euphoric daze—until I look up at a handful of arriving passengers streaming into the concourse—and see Monica!

At first I blink, not believing the evidence of my senses. It *can't* be Monica. It's impossible. Monica is in Florida. Monica called from Florida last night.

But now, clearly searching, her eyes discover me and a broad smile spreads across her face. She comes hurrying toward me with arms outstretched.

"My *dear,*" she cries. "I was so afraid my plane would be late. Willie and I had the time schedule planned right down to the minute, but you can never be certain about anything where planes are involved."

She gives me a hasty kiss as, stunned, I rise to my feet, aware of no other emotion than blank confusion. Nor does my reaction seem to surprise her. She utters a laugh of pure delight at my obvious astonishment.

"But where is Willie?" she demands, looking around.

"Er—well . . . as a matter of fact, Monica, Willie felt a bit under the weather this morning."

Her face falls. "Oh, drat. That spoils everything. We didn't want you to know until the very last minute." She gives me an accusing frown. "I'll bet he told you last night, didn't he? There was something in your tone when I called. Darling, we were both worried about you, but I take full credit for putting the idea in Willie's head. He's really the sweetest and kindest creature alive, you know that, but he simply never *thinks* about anyone else. Did you think it beastly of us, keeping it all a secret?"

I am still in a daze, but now the euphoria has turned into a kind of horrified bewilderment.

"You mean about getting married? I was surprised, yes—"

"No, no, I mean *this*. The trip. Mexico. I told Willie he really *had* to do something to show his appreciation. All the help you've been to him. And I know if it weren't for you he probably never would have got up the nerve to pop the question. I'm not sure which he enjoyed more, giving you the trip or keeping you in the dark about it till the last minute—well, it was *supposed* to be the last minute. We both wanted to see the look on your face when Willie told you to open that bag and look at the tickets and see *your* name on them."

She is still chattering when the first announcement comes for boarding my flight. Monica gives me a quick hug.

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"Godspeed, my dear, and happy landings! I shan't wait for the takeoff. I'll dash straight over to Willie's and make sure the poor lamb is all right. Oh, gosh, I almost forgot. Willie sent me a letter and insisted *I* must be the one to give it to you when we saw you off. He *can* be a shy one at times, you know."

During the flight I read Willie's letter several times. It repeats pretty much what Monica told me and mentions the bank draft awaiting me in Mexico City. Of course, it's the sheerest fantasy to imagine I won't be stopped the minute I step off the plane. Yet if, as seems likely, I am destined for a cold and darker place, I shall be grateful, all things considered, for even a stopover in paradise.

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Capitalized words add—60¢ per word
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DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the fourth preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

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YOUR NAME _____

FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____

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HYSC-7

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MYNQ-7

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